better than your best

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better than your best

by menocchio

Starting the Bracket

Something had is something gold
in the hand, or the eye,
unless of course you lose it.

(Are you gonna lose it?)

Everything but him is a struggle;
like maybe the world is out
to get you.

(Are you gonna let it get you?)

Empty stretch of road ahead;
the future is so numbingly open,
surely an easy strike.

(Are you gonna strike?)

Home is supposed to be a place of rest.
nothing happens there—
who the fuck told you that?

Johnny vs LAX

PART ONE

Flying was a stupid way to travel, he thought for at least the tenth time that day. You stuff yourself in a tin can in the sky with nothing to look at but the seat in front of you; a blink of a trip bookended by overcrowded shopping malls. Where was the adventure? The people in this place weren't traveling, they were – *commuting*.

What's more, they were late commuters. Where the hell was the plane?

He thought it would be easier if he stopped watching the actual gate like any second Daniel would appear in the doorway of the boarding area, smiling and finally here. So he decided to look away. He wandered past the newsstand again; the All American Burger; the duty-free tobacconist. He reached the end of his tape and flipped it.

But soon enough, without really even choosing to, he ended up back with the crowd in front of the gate where TWA flight 4673 out of Newark was supposedly deboarding, and had been for the past *forty minutes*.

He didn't understand why Daniel didn't just let him drive out again.

He felt out of place among this huge crowd of family and underlings and strangers-with-placards. Maybe he should've written a sign, made a joke of it? Daniel probably would've gotten a kick out of that: Johnny holding a page with something dumb on it, like *karate god* or something. Oh well. Too late.

He reached the end of his tape. Flipped it.

It had been nothing, really. Three, almost four weeks since Johnny drove back from New Jersey, and it wasn't that bad, honest. Because waiting for Daniel was better than just living through the day, not expecting anything. When he wasn't missing him, it was a little like having a secret identity, a super power only he knew about.

Plus, Daniel called every day.

That kid was merciless with his uncle's phone bill.

Johnny was almost as scared as he was eager at the idea of him being actually back, because he knew once Daniel was here, Johnny's memory of the trip would become solidly a thing of the past. It would stop being a companion to his days, something he thought about and held in the slower moments.

And what if – what if they were different? What if it didn't feel the same way: all his dumbest, worst fears about something changing once they were no longer on the road coming true?

The newsstand; the All American Burger; the duty-free tobacconist. Johnny didn't sigh because he wasn't dramatic, but he rolled his eyes upwards a little. He pivoted on his heel to walk back towards the gate, and Daniel was standing in his way.

People flowed around them, performing the overburdened airport side-step, luggage banging against legs, expressions distracted and unseeing.

He was wearing new clothes, Johnny noticed: a thick blue sweatshirt and jeans, stuff meant for colder climes, never mind it was seventy degrees outside. And he was smiling at Johnny, brown eyes arrested and warm.

Johnny belatedly dragged his headphones down around his neck. Idol bled out into the air.

“Here I thought you'd be at the gate, breathlessly awaiting my victorious return,” said Daniel, and his voice was the same, of course it was.

“I was,” he said, stepping closer. Shifting on his feet, like this was a match. “But I got bored.”

“Bored? You're not supposed to get bored while pining, Johnny.” Daniel watched him for a few seconds, something that looked a lot like happiness starting to overpower his expression. It flooded his grin, ruined his lecturing tone. He was here.

Johnny couldn't say anything, so he sort of shrugged and smiled back in relief.

“Well, hell,” said Daniel after a couple seconds, shrugging off his backpack, “if you're not gonna do it—”

He took an unsuspecting Johnny around the middle, slid his leg in and fucking dipped him. A couple people passing chuckled – oh, boys; friends, making a joke.

He blinked up at Daniel, whose eyes were lit up with delight and starting to shine with an unholy glow of impish challenge, and Johnny could barely do more than lock his core to keep them stable in the air and think, dazed: hang on second. You can't just. This isn't. The world?

The laughs cut off when Daniel bent and kissed him.

Johnny vs 30,000 Parking Spots

Fifteen minutes later, Johnny's face was still burning and they still hadn't found the car.

He could've sworn it was in this lane; five down and seven across from the edge of terminal sidewalk. Hadn't it been five down and seven across? Or had it been seven down and five across? He turned in place, squinting against the sun glinting off all that automotive metal. Rows of cars stretched out in all directions, heat turning the air hazy over the hoods.

“Whew, home sweet home,” said Daniel, for the second time. He'd taken off his sweater but was still sweating, and it was hard to look at him and concentrate, so Johnny just – didn't. “The smog, the heat, the sunshine. Getting lost in the desert—”

“We're not lost in the desert,” said Johnny. “It's a parking lot.”

“A parking lot in the desert,” he pointed out.

“And we're not lost!”

He set off with renewed speed. Perhaps if he acted like he knew where was going, memory would follow. He just needed his brain to get out of the way of his feet.

“Hey, hold up,” called Daniel, and Johnny paused and waited for him.

Daniel waved his bunched sweater meaningfully and ripped open the backpack slung over Johnny's shoulder to stuff it away. He zipped it up again and slapped him on the back with a smile. Johnny turned away and continued searching for the car.

If it had been seven down and five across but they went five down and seven across, they needed to go two back and two up and—

Hang on.

Johnny looked up at the sun and then back at the airport terminal. Daniel waited, hands clasped behind his head, seemingly content to watch him. He was still idly smiling.

“We went out the wrong door,” said Johnny. “We're supposed to be in the northwest lot.”

“Hey, that's okay. I needed to stretch my legs after that flight.”

“And there she is,” said Daniel, jogging forward to the Avanti. “Heya, sweetheart.”

“Even I don't call her that,” said Johnny, tossing Daniel's backpack into the back seat with great finality and relief. He didn't stop walking.

“Well, no, you don't go for pet names. But that's alright, I got you covered. I figure a car needs both kinds of parenting, y'know? One to wash it and be all strict about what fluids go in, and the other to – oh, hey, hm,” because Johnny had crowded him against the passenger side. The scalding heat from the Avanti could be felt through the knee of his jeans, and he took care to stop Daniel from resting his hands on the door via guiding them around his waist.

Daniel put his head back to meet his gaze: mouth curving, eyes half-lidded. And it wasn't that he was preferable to the show-off who insisted on outing them to a bunch of strangers in an airport, because that guy was as much Daniel as this private, pleased version. And Johnny liked them both, but right now he needed this one.

“Okay,” said Daniel quietly; smiling, always smiling at him, “hit me with your best shot, Johnny.”

Johnny took his head in his hands and kissed him. And this time, they didn't have to stop.

Johnny vs The 405

With LAX's flying saucer in the rearview, they drove back to the valley.

He'd dreamed of this a couple times – just this: Daniel back in the passenger seat, the Avanti carrying them fast down the road beneath a sunny sky. Boring dream, all told, and he'd be fine with having it again.

The real thing is better though. Johnny knew the 405 like his own fist, and it allowed him to focus on the important parts of the drive, like passing taxicabs and watching the wind through Daniel's hair. But he wasn't the only one doing some watching.

Johnny slid his eyes over. “What.”

“Nothing, nothing.”

He waited another half mile before pulling his sunglasses off. “*What*.”

Daniel grinned and slouched into the corner of the seat. “Can't I enjoy the view? Home is a good look on you. You seem very – relaxed.”

“I am relaxed. You're not,” he said, pointedly reaching over and pressing the other boy's knee into stillness.

“Hey, I'm just eager to be back, see Mr. Miyagi again.” Johnny waited, not taking his hand off the knee. “...And I'm trying to decide what to tell him.”

“What do you mean. Tell him what?”

“About us, genius.”

Johnny was so surprised, he let the knee go. He put his hand back on the wheel so they wouldn't crash and said, belatedly, “I mean. You don't have to. Do you? Maybe you shouldn't. I mean, why would you? Don't?”

“Because he's my best friend? You said Bobby knew about you.”

“Yeah, but not because I told him. I'm not an idiot. It's not like one day in the eighth grade I leaned over in social studies and went, *hey, by the way*.”

“Okay, fair. But Mr. Miyagi's not an eighth grader.”

No, he was practically a senior citizen. But if Johnny started listing all the ways Daniel was incredibly fucking weird, they'd never finish this conversation.

Some of Johnny's reservations must've been obvious on his face, because before he can say anything more, Daniel continues:

“Look, it's not a big deal.” Not a big deal! Johnny thinks. How had he forgotten that Daniel was from another planet? “I'm just strategizing. Trying to think of the best way to do this. Mr. Miyagi's kind of old-fashioned, you see.”

His stomach twisted a little. “But that's – bad, right? That seems bad. Maybe you shouldn't tell him.”

“No, not like that.” Daniel paused, searching for the words. “I mean he's very – gallant, okay, like he big on rules about how to treat a lady right. So I guess – I just need to figure out a way to get him to understand you're my lady.”

Johnny's expression suffered a structural collapse, and he said, annoyed, “I am not your lady.”

And then Daniel was swinging up against him, one hand on his thigh and mouth to his ear, exaggerated huskiness wavering on a breathy, “No, you're my big. Strong. *Man*.”

He barely got the words out before he gave way to a gale of laughter. Johnny endured.

“Hey, you walked right into that one,” said Daniel, slapping his thigh.

“You're such a punk." Johnny caught him with his right arm before he could subside into the passenger seat and pulled him in against his side. Daniel made a slight sound of surprise, but it was a pleased sound too.

Johnny dropped his arm around his shoulders and slid his sunglasses back into place with his free hand, knee briefly lifting to hold the wheel.

“Home,” decided Daniel, making himself comfortable, “is a *very* good look on you.”

Johnny vs Second Impressions

Johnny squinted.

Mr. Miyagi stared.

The dojo was, no other word for it – beautiful. The moment Johnny saw it, he felt like he understood Daniel's karate a little bit better. This wasn't a gym or fucking exercise studio, it was a *life*. Specifically, his sensei's life.

And sometime later, when they were away and Johnny has recovered from probably being found wanting, he was going to really lay into Daniel. Maybe put him in a headlock or something. To think he thought for even a second his sensei wasn't coming back for him, or didn't care about him – god, how stupid can you get.

For now, though, he kneeled at a low table and tried to withstand the scrutiny. Was he supposed to not look away? Blink? Was he losing if he blinked? Was he *supposed* to lose, would that be the respectful thing to do? Johnny didn't like losing. But man, his eyes were very dry.

Neither of them had said a word so far. In some corner of his brain, Johnny thought this might last for the rest of his life.

“And heeeere's Johnny!” said Daniel, finally walking back into the room, having sorted the contents of his bag and settled into the guest house. “Sorry, bad joke – did either of you see that flick? Freaked me right out, think I had nightmares for months. Anyway, yeah, here's Johnny, you remember Johnny, Mr. Miyagi?”

Mr. Miyagi blinked slowly and finally looked away from assessing Johnny to glance up at Daniel with what might've been incredulity, or maybe a belated heartbroken realization that his sole pupil was actually a complete fucking moron. Hard to say, because Johnny wasn't ordinarily the best at reading even other white people's faces. But for his part, he also stared up at Daniel, because—

Well. There was the tournament, where Johnny swept his leg and shoved him and generally acted like a dick. And before that there was the Cobra Kai dojo, where Johnny stood proudly next to his asshole of a sensei and offered to beat on Daniel in front of everyone. And before *that* there was Halloween, where Johnny – well.

“Miyagi remember,” is all the man said.

Johnny pressed his lips together and tried to smile, but it was hard to say if his face actually moved. He felt stiffer than a new gi fresh out of its wrapping. He also felt kind of sick; the past still existed on the road, sure, but it was always in the rearview: visible only via a tiny eight-by-two inch rectangular mirror. Just then, it felt like it was overtaking him.

For a moment, he wanted very badly to get up and run to the Avanti and spray gravel driving away from this scene.

It was already a disaster, and what else had he expected? This was the problem with hanging around Daniel too much; his endless optimism wasn't infectious but it sure did make one forget just how bad things actually were.

Daniel flopped down next to Johnny at the table, and he didn't – do anything, but their shoulders brushed. Johnny snuck a sideways glance, but he was looking at his sensei, expression open as ever.

“Right, well – boy, have I got a story to tell you. Here I thought the fight in the castle was going to be the most exciting thing that ever happened to me, like – Chozen, whew. Remember Chozen?”

Johnny stood before he could find out whether Okinawans did things like slap their own faces in disbelief. Daniel looked up at him, mouth still open to presumably remind the man about the zipline psychopath. He gave Johnny a questioning look.

“I just,” said Johnny, gesturing jerkily towards the door. “I forgot something in the car. Be right back – no, really, man,” because Daniel was rising up on his knees, suspicious. He waved. “Just – carry on.”

He did not flee, but walked in a very calm manner back out to the Avanti. “'Remember Chozen?'” he muttered to himself once outside. “Jesus Christ.”

It wasn't that he had a low opinion of himself, but he was pretty sure nothing that happened in September beat the Okinawa trip. Daniel's priorities were too geared towards life; have sex a couple times and that outshines a death match, apparently.

God, he wasn't going to mention any of the sex stuff, right? He said he was going to take it slow, but what did that even mean, when it was Daniel saying it? Guy went from finding out Johnny liked dick to

going to town on his in the space of like, a *day*.

Johnny hurriedly reached down over the passenger side and opened the glove compartment.

“Uh – here, sir,” he said to Mr. Miyagi, back inside. He held out a postcard with the Sante Fe railway on the one side. “Daniel wrote it in New Mexico—”

“Texas, actually,” said Daniel, blinking between the postcard and Johnny, and if he wasn't careful about how he was looking at him, that whole delicate, strategic plan to gradually tell his sensei about the two of them was going to be super awkwardly unnecessary.

“You started it in New Mexico, whatever.” He resumed kneeling and took a quick sip of the water in front of him. “He didn't have an address for your place in Okinawa, and apparently he's allergic to hard work if there's no trophy in it, so—”

Daniel shoved him, but Mr. Miyagi didn't see, because he was turning the postcard over in his hands. If he could read that dense block of chicken-scratch, power to him.

Eventually Mr. Miyagi set the postcard aside and looked between them, eyes lingering on Johnny but finally landing on his friend.

“Daniel-san promise story?”

Daniel smiled. “Right, so I'll skip the first part, it's pretty boring – shut up, Johnny – so there I was on the side of the road outside Victorville....”

Johnny vs Goodbye

Daniel trailed him out the front of the dojo, past the line of tarp-draped cars Johnny was dying to investigate, and through the gate. He latched it behind him and turned and snaked his arms around Johnny's hips, fingers hooking through his belt loops.

“There,” he said, walking Johnny backwards towards the Avanti; Johnny had to take it on faith he wasn't going to let him trip. “That wasn't so bad, was it?”

They fetched up against the car, and Johnny pulled Daniel in close. “He barely said like, ten words to me.”

His hips were jostled. “Yeah, sure, he's a quiet guy, takes some time to warm up to people.” Daniel cocked his head, eyes traveling up and to the side like he was tracking a dust mote. “Weird, why does that sound so familiar?”

He rolled his eyes and pulled him up into a very thorough kiss. Daniel opened into it immediately and made a low, pleased sound that Johnny swore he could feel in his spine. It was quiet and easy, like this: out here. He had to keep reminding himself there was no countdown, no mileage to watch. It was just them, together, with no reason on the horizon why they shouldn't be always.

Except dinner with his mom.

“I uh,” he said, between kisses, “I kind of have to get going.” Daniel's sigh was a warm gust against his neck. Johnny looked over his shoulder, back at the dojo. “You sure your sensei's going to be cool?”

Daniel eased back but didn't let him go. He looked at him with a quizzical smile. “Yeah. And, I mean – we didn't even tell him anything.”

Johnny didn't want to overstate his own awesomeness or anything, but he kind of thought it was hard to spin the Greyhound chase as platonic. He hadn't realized Daniel was going to mention that part when telling the story. When Mr. Miyagi glanced his way, he'd had to fight to sit still and look like, just a really great buddy.

“Right,” he said.

“You worry too much.”

And that made Johnny kiss him again, because it was either that or headlock time. It was another several minutes before his hands found Daniel's and began the torturous process of extricating himself from his grip.

“Gotta go,” he murmured.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Daniel, finally stepping back. He watched as Johnny got behind the wheel, and then they looked at each other.

“So – what now?” asked Johnny. The rest of the fall stretched out in front of them, completely open but for the part where they both probably needed to get jobs and figure out what to do with their lives. (No biggie.)

Daniel took a step back. “Now, you go sit by the phone in your glorious mansion—”

“Pool house, I told you, it's the damn pool house.”

“ – and wait for my call.”

“Wait for your call,” repeated Johnny, checking his mirrors. “So formal. Am I applying to something? Are we starting a business?”

Daniel threw him a finger gun. “Don't call me, I'll call you. Or – y'know, you could call me. Go ahead. Mr. Miyagi might pick up, but don't let that stop you. I love getting phone calls.”

Johnny put his elbow out the window and watched him back up. “Yeah, I bet you do.”

“But if you do call you have to talk,” warned Daniel. He was back near the gate now. “None of that heavy breathing stuff, it's kind of creepy.”

Johnny looked around the front of the Avanti for something he could throw, but his commitment to maintaining a clean interior defeated him.

“Hey, Johnny?” He gave up and looked back over at him. Daniel smiled quietly. “Talk to you tonight? Same time?”

It was difficult to remember he didn't have to look away or hide his own smile. “So long as you remember you're on Pacific time again.” He predicted Daniel was going to face plant and fall asleep by like,

nine.

Daniel put his hand up like he was swearing an oath. “Already changed my watch and everything.”

Johnny started the car and eased away from the curb. He watched his rearview as he drove away, same as Daniel stayed outside and watched until he turned the corner. It was a good-bye, but it was okay.

Who was he kidding; he missed him already.

Johnny vs Microwave Dinners

His mom was on the phone when he got home, and she tried to communicate to him via short, wordless gesturing that he should do something about dinner. What, precisely, was unclear; they didn't exactly have a full kitchen, and anyway, neither of them were much good at cooking. The past few weeks had involved a lot of takeout, but he couldn't exactly order anything while she was using the phone.

One of Laura's gold digger ("don't you ever call her that again, Johnny") divorced friends from the country club had told her it was important to stand their ground and maintain residency during the divorce proceedings, and so there they were, holed up in the pool house, separated from the enemy encampment by a chlorine pool and set of lounge chairs. It was a little weird.

"I was just wondering if there was anything that could be done," she said, pacing. "He keeps trying to – no, nothing like that. It's not like that. But I don't want to talk to him, and isn't there like. A law about talking without lawyers present? Like he can't do it?"

Johnny opened the fridge and stared at its contents: a gallon of two percent milk, a quart of orange juice, half a bottle of white wine, six eggs, and four old white paper takeout containers. He closed the fridge and wandered back into the other room.

"I *know* it's not the same as with cops," she said, and her hand was on her hip, uh oh. "I'm not stupid, Leonard. I'm just saying, don't I have any civil rights here?" She turned and spotted him. Johnny gestured behind him at the fridge and shrugged; she covered the receiver with her hand and whispered, "Freezer." And then louder and into the phone, "I don't know Miranda, who's Miranda? Is that the name of his lawyer? No, I *don't* think I'm being ridiculous."

Johnny went back to the kitchenette and checked the freezer. It was stocked full of microwavable meals. Awesome: not.

He took two out and set to reading the directions, but the conversation in the other room kept distracting him.

He always felt guilty when he overheard any of the divorce stuff; yeah, Sid was an asshole, and had never been good enough for his mom, but he'd kept her comfortable. Now here she was living in a pool house, about to eat frozen beef stroganoff, and all because

Johnny wasn't smart enough about hiding his skin mags.

With a couple minutes left on the microwave, the sound of the phone call ended in the other room.

He glanced over when she came in, not moving his elbow from the counter, or his chin from his palm.

“Well, you don't look exactly thrilled,” she said, passing a light hand over his hair as she headed for the fridge. She took out the bottle of wine and glanced sideways at him. “Is something wrong? Daniel get in alright?”

He straightened up. “Yeah, it's fine. He's fine. I dropped him at his sensei's place.” His face went a little hot, like it always did every time they talked about Daniel. It felt like he was spilling state secrets or something. “What was that about? Did Sid say something today?”

She poured a generous glass of wine. “Just the usual crap. Nothing you need to worry about.”

The microwave dinged, and she flashed him a smile. “You get those and I'll grab the silverware?”

Over dinner, he described for her the dojo, and he thought he was doing a pretty good job of it, until she used her fork to jostle his dinner a little.

“So far I've heard twice as many words out of you about the punching bags than about Daniel. Johnny,” she said sternly, “did you start dating this boy so you could infiltrate his gym space?”

“What?” He shook his hair out of his eyes. “No. I just – I don't know what you want me to say.”

“Well – you're on the phone every night. And you hate the phone.” She spun her fork in the air slowly and squinted at him. “So... what do you two talk about?”

He shrugged. “Stuff. I don't know.”

“Alright, alright, don't tell me.”

“No, really – *I don't know*,” he said, insistent. It seemed really important to get the point across: “Daniel never shuts up. He could talk about anything. He *has* talked about anything. Sometimes it feels

like he's probably talked about *every*thing, and at some point he circled back around to cover old ground – what? Why are you looking at me like that?"

She toasted him with her glass of wine, and continued to poorly bite back her grin. "Oh, y'know – young love. It's just so beautiful, is all."

His face went hot again and he mutinously shoveled a forkful of beef stroganoff into his mouth.

Johnny vs Jet Lag

“I'm not falling asleep.”

Johnny tucked the receiver against his ear and discreetly cracked his beer at arm's length. “Uh huh.”

“Really, I'm not. It's barely nine-thirty.”

He walked back over to the lounge chair in the middle of the room holding the phone base in one hand and his beer in the other. He set the phone down on the ground and reclined back, sipping from his can.

“It's called jet lag, and I don't think you can will yourself out of it.”

“It's called jet lag, he says.”

“Well, it is.”

“Have you ever even had jet lag? No, because you've never flown out of your own time zone before. It's a measly three hour difference, that's nothing. Trust the expert here, okay, I just need to push through, adjust, and I'll be fine."

If he shut his eyes and focused, he could almost pretend he was there beside him. “Or you could stop being stupid, and just go to sleep?”

Daniel sighed heavily over the phone. “Do you think the romance has gone out of the relationship?”

And: no. Johnny checked the levels of the romance meter regularly, made sure to keep it topped up. Daniel wasn't allowed to know about the meter, because he'd mess it around.

“No,” he said, and sipped his beer.

“I mean, you're calling me stupid, you're pretending to not get why I want to stay awake.” A yawn, poorly stifled. “'M just saying, Johnny. Just saying.”

“What are you saying?” he asked, putting his head back on the lounge chair to stare at the ceiling.

“...What?” asked Daniel. He'd totally lost the plot.

“This is dumb. You should just go to bed.”

He sighed. “Maybe.” A rustle of something that might've been sheets; had he carried the phone into the spare bedroom? How long was that cord? He wasn't moonily sitting around with his sensei five feet away, was he? “Wish you were here.”

Johnny's fingers tightened around the can. “Yeah.”

“I mean, weeks of thinking about it, and here we are still stuck talking on the phone instead of having amazing sex.”

Johnny rolled his eyes and tipped the can back. “Yeah – hey, what are you doing tomorrow? I thought we could get lunch and go to the beach or something. You know, get you reacquainted with a proper state, since you just got back from living in an igloo or whatever.”

“Johnny Lawrence,” said the impossibly smug voice, “Are you suggesting—”

“Yes,” he interrupted, mindful of the possibility of a sensei in the background. “I mean, maybe. If no one's around. I'll think about it.”

And now Daniel sounded affronted. “You'll think about it. Well, hey, don't do many favors, pal.”

Johnny had to actually take the phone away from his ear so he could hold it up and make a bewildered face at the place where his voice was coming from. Phones were so stupid. How was he supposed to communicate like this?

He fitted the phone back to his ear and said, a little impatiently, “Daniel, if you were here right now, I'd already have you naked in my lap, you trying to fit your knees over my shoulders – but you're *not* here, and you're not gonna be, so I don't see the point in us torturing ourselves.”

There was a brief silence, and then Daniel said, “Like, I think you could have the skills for phone sex, but the spirit's just not willing? But that's okay. We can work our way up to it.”

Johnny dropped his mostly-empty beer in favor of covering his face. He couldn't even protest or say no, or whatever, because he didn't want to put up with Daniel's complaining, but like – *no*, they were never, ever having phone sex. How excruciating would that be? All of the commentary on Napoleon's march on Russia and none of the dick

fondling.

“I'll see you tomorrow?” asked Johnny, hand still over his eyes.

“Yeah. Yes.” Another rustle; maybe he really was in bed already? Daniel's voice was hushed when he spoke again, “Okay, so like – you hang up first.”

Johnny's brow furrowed. “Uh, okay?”

And so he did.

Johnny vs The Letter

They met at a burger stand near the beach, the Avanti and Daniel's classic Ford making the small parking lot into a bit of an impromptu car show.

Johnny stood back and admired the view, thinking about how lucky he was that he was dating someone who also happened to have a cool car; it would be embarrassing if he had to park next to like, a Buick LeSabre. But this felt right: Johnny's beautiful speed machine and Daniel's impractical-but-pretty throwback. They looked good together.

Daniel was distracted, and apparently in no mood to appreciate the scenery. He got out of his car and rounded it, talking all the while, and kept talking as he passed Johnny; kept talking as he turned back around and hooked his arm around Johnny's to tow him away from the cars; kept talking as they walked up to the window to order.

“And the thing is, I don't think he even read it,” he said, resuming his rant after they'd given the girl their order. Daniel perched on the nearest concrete parking block and threw his hands out. “Like, I bet as soon as he saw who it was from, he was like, All Valley Tournament who? Sorry, don't know it!”

“All Valley?” said Johnny from where he was balancing on the edge of the block on just the toes of his left foot. “Wait, what are you talking about?”

Daniel put his head back and stared at him. “You haven't been listening.”

“Nope.”

“Nice, that's real nice.”

He stopped the balancing act and landed next to Daniel on the block, bumping their shoulders. He squinted over at their cars and made like he was thinking very hard. “You roll up and don't even say hello, or try to kiss me – I don't know, Daniel, do you think the romance has gone out of the relationship?”

Daniel glanced around the lot and then bumped forward into a quick kiss. “Hello, hello, hello,” he murmured. Johnny enjoyed the feeling of his reluctant smile against his jaw.

"Hi," he said. He folded his arms over his knees placidly. “So what's happening with the All Valley?”

He sighed and sat back. “I got a letter a while ago apparently, it was waiting for me in this pile – they've changed the rules about the tournament. I'd only have to fight in the final.”

“What?” Johnny looked at him, face twisting. “That's *bullshit*.”

And maybe this wasn't the sympathetic boyfriend response Daniel had been expecting, because he immediately said, sort of aggressively, “Why's it bullshit? It's my title, isn't it, it's mine to defend.”

“That's not how it works. Karate isn't wrestling, okay, the All Valley isn't the WWF. Do you know how many fighters make it to the final match two years in a row? It's pretty rare. My friend Tommy made it two years ago and he didn't even make it to the *semis* last year.”

“You made it three years in a row.”

“Well – yeah, but that's because I'm really, really good.” It wasn't bragging if it was true; Johnny kicked ass like the ocean pushed tide.

Daniel pushed up from the block and stood there, glaring down at him with his hands on his hips. “So you don't think I deserve to fight in the final.”

“That's not what I said.”

This was the last thing he'd expected to be talking about today, and his brain was only starting to catch up and realize the honor of karate as a competitive sport maybe could take a temporary backseat to making sure Daniel didn't storm off on him. It was easy to forget when the other boy was usually alternating between being sweet and sex-obsessed, that he was also insanely competitive.

Johnny rubbed the back of his neck. “Look – I didn't even know you wanted to fight this year. I mean, we graduated. Wouldn't it be weird, beating on a bunch of high school kids?”

“You're telling me you weren't planning on fighting?” asked Daniel skeptically.

“I hadn't thought about it,” he said honestly. “I've been a little busy.” And he tried giving him a meaningful look, widening his eyes and raising his eyebrows, but Daniel was already staring off into the

distance. What the hell. This date was really getting off to a rough start.

He thought he could probably fix it if he just got Daniel distracted, but there wasn't much he could do while they waited for their food.

“So – your sensei doesn't want you to fight?” he asked, trying to sound appropriately sensitive. Maybe Daniel was just misinterpreting something.

“He said karate shouldn't be used to defend a plastic metal trophy.” No, that actually sounded pretty clear cut. “I mean, it's like it never even occurred to him that maybe that *plastic metal trophy* is like, symbolic! Of my honor!”

And then he said a lot more, but Johnny was looking back at their cars, and wondering if he could convince Daniel to race sometime. There had to be a way to turn his competitiveness to Johnny's advantage, and he'd yet to think of a way to do it with sex.

Johnny vs The Big Sulk

Johnny frowned against the wind and tried tugging the blanket into place. No good, he was going to need a rock or something to weigh the corner down.

“Grab me a rock, will you?” he said to Daniel, who was still going on and on about the stupid letter.

Daniel walked up the beach a ways and kicked around until he found something. He came back and dropped it in Johnny’s lap, still yammering: a small rock no bigger than a Kennedy coin, what even.

“This is not a rock,” he said, interrupting the rant. “This is a *pebble*.”

Daniel threw his arms out, looking suddenly overwhelmed. “If all you have to offer is criticism, why not do it yourself? You’re acting just like *him*,” and then he said a lot more, but Johnny was rolling first his eyes and then to his feet and going to find some proper weight stones.

When he got back, Daniel was sitting in the center of the wind-tossed blanket, knees to chest and glaring at the ocean like it had personally told him he could not fight in that year’s All Valley tournament.

Johnny shook his head and dragged the corners of the blanket out, thumping the rocks down with satisfaction. He knelt a moment longer in the sand, squinting at Daniel, who did not look around or say anything. He suppressed a sigh.

“You know what’s funny?” he said, stretching out beside the miserable hunched lump that was his boyfriend. He propped his head up on his elbow. “You don’t even like tournament fighting.”

“Oh, how would you know?” muttered Daniel.

Johnny reached out and lightly shoved his hip. He kept shoving until Daniel broke and shoved him back, and then Johnny used the extended arm to pull him in; Daniel cooperated, but his movements were jerky and quick, like his life was the worst, just the absolute *worst*, poor Daniel LaRusso getting spooned on a beach.

Johnny tucked himself around him and looked down at his dark head. Already better. “You’re right, I don’t know. Maybe I’m wrong—”

“Yeah,” snorted Daniel, folding his arm atop the one Johnny had slung

around his waist, because even when he was being a fucking obnoxious punk, he still liked being held. “Damn right.”

“So tell me, man – how many tournaments have you fought in, beside last year’s All Valley?”

Daniel paused, and Johnny couldn’t see his full face, but he was pretty sure he could draw the narrow-eyed, quick-thinking expression he was probably wearing from memory.

“To answer the question you weren’t going to ask,” he said, now thoroughly enjoying himself, “*yes*, there are other tournaments. All year, there are tournaments throughout southern California. But of course you didn’t know that, because you *don’t like fighting in tournaments*.”

“I could’ve fought. I could’ve, if I’d known about them – except Mr. Miyagi probably would’ve refused to train me for those too!”

Johnny backed up a little, resisting Daniel’s pull in favor of rolling the other boy onto his back so he could look down at him. Daniel’s hair fell away from his forehead, and he met Johnny’s eyes with a stubborn expression, eyes dark.

“Daniel,” he said: very, very seriously, “you don’t like hitting people.”

And he opened his mouth to automatically deny this, but then he paused, uncertain. Johnny bit back a grin, but he wasn’t very good at it when looking at Daniel. And after a moment, Daniel started biting back a grin of his own. Okay, thank fuck: argument over.

“Your problem is – you just like winning.”

“Okay, that just makes me sound petty,” said Daniel, a second before Johnny kissed him quiet.

They're far away from other people and surrounded by dunes on three sides; it's the first real privacy they've had since Parsippany. It didn't take longer than a couple seconds for Daniel to get with the program and greedily pull Johnny over him.

He pinned the other boy's hips with his own, and nosed along his cheek, encouraging him to turn his head and let Johnny at his neck. He pressed a kiss to his pulse and said in his ear:

“Why would you want to train for a stupid tournament, anyway? It'll

just cut down on our opportunities to do this."

"You are right, you're so right," said Daniel fervently. His hands reached around and squeezed his ass, and Johnny hadn't forgotten – couldn't forget – how easily and eagerly Daniel claimed possession of him, but he'd missed it so much. The way he opened to Johnny, drew him in. It felt like belonging. It felt like finally coming home.

Johnny vs That Whole "Wouldn't It Be Nice" Thing

“Okay, so whenever I pictured this, I didn't really figure the sand into the equation. Maybe if it wasn't so windy?”

Johnny pursed his lips and turned his head to the side, tried spitting again. He could swear he still felt some grains on the tip of his tongue. “Fucking beach sex.”

Daniel reclined on his elbows, mouth cocked as he considered the situation. His shirt was unbuttoned and fluttering to the sides, and Johnny saw no reason why he shouldn't rest his head on his chest. And once that was done, there was no reason why Daniel shouldn't dig his hand up the back of his hair, which he did, and that was better.

“Don't get me wrong, obviously that was great. But I think there's a reason you don't see condoms advertising *scattered with sand for her pleasure*, y'know?” Johnny grunted and turned his face in, shut his eyes. “Perhaps if we set up a tent. Do you own a tent? Of course you don't. I don't either. I wonder if Mr. Miyagi does – he'd probably let me borrow it. Of course we'd have to make it an actual like, weekend camping trip or something, because explaining why I wanted a tent for just the afternoon would be revealing a little too much, if you know what I mean. Can't be turning another man's tent into a sex tent. But if we did a weekend thing, actually camped with it and lots of sex happened to occur, well, that's different.”

“You just got back, and already you're planning another trip?” said Johnny.

The hand in his hair tightened a little and shook his head. “Hey, you're invited. I'm not suggesting I go off into the woods by myself and spend two days jerking off.”

“No, I mean – are we seriously going to sneak off someplace every time?” he asked. The idea that they had to even plan ahead for it felt weird. Like, there was planning ahead in a good way, obviously. But every time? Seemed like a lot of work. What if it started to feel forced? It had felt so simple in September. Well. Terrifying and crazy. But also: somehow simple.

“You're right, that's not sustainable. Damn, this is why make-out points exist in movies, huh. Where does one go to get a hickey from

Kenickie, or....” he fell silent.

Johnny blinked over at the dunes. “You're trying to think of something that rhymes with my name, aren't you.”

“...Maybe.”

He raised his head and leaned up to kiss him, slow and comfortable. Daniel hummed, and the low, happy sound filled Johnny's head, momentarily obliterating all doubts.

Johnny vs The Mechanics of Handholding

Taking advantage of an empty schedule that came with being two guys out of school with no jobs, they walked along the beach for a while afterwards. Daniel found a long piece of driftwood and dragged it through the sand behind them, a line that was lifted and sifted back into nothing when the tide rolled in.

Johnny looked out at the waves and thought very intently about grabbing his hand. He had gotten pretty good at reaching out for Daniel in general, but the whole handholding thing still felt really, really gay. He thought he just needed to visualize the line of attack.

“Didn't you say yesterday you had some grand idea for the future?” he asked.

Daniel looked over at him. After a second, he switched to walking backwards; his expression made Johnny preemptively sigh.

“You mean you were actually listening?” he inquired with slow dawning delight.

“Oh, c'mon,” said Johnny.

Daniel threw his hands out, and the piece of driftwood went flying. It didn't look intentional. Johnny looked after it, unimpressed. “He listens to me! My boyfriend listens to me. This has to make me the most powerful figure on the planet, at least—”

“*At least*?”

Daniel stopped walking, and put his hand over Johnny's chest. He looked up at him solemnly. “Fear not, I will use this knowledge responsibly.”

He was so embarrassing. Johnny slapped his hand away and shoved him lightly along to get him walking again. Daniel fell back into step at his side.

“So you going to tell me your big idea or not?”

“Well,” he said, elbowing him, “since you're so interested—”

“Never mind. I don't care, I don't want to know.”

“So you know how they decided to turn my old apartment into overpriced condos for the nonexistent rising upper middle class of Reseda? And how Mr. Miyagi lost his job, and his old workroom?”

“I am familiar with that tragedy,” told to him in nine-parts; Daniel should consider getting a backing orchestra one of these days, “but what can you do about it?”

“Glad you asked,” he said brightly. “So Mr. Miyagi's big thing is his bonsai trees, right? He's always wanted to open up a proper nursery, but the man's not exactly practiced at acting on his wants, right? Luckily, he's got me now. And me, I see what people need, I see what they want, and I try to reconcile the two, make something happen. It's my thing, it's what I'm good at.”

“I feel like you're trying to sell me something, I'm just not sure what.”

Daniel looked at him, eyebrows lifting. “Hm?”

“Get to the point,” elaborated Johnny.

He put his hands up; Johnny followed their path through the air and thought about grabbing one of them. Both of them? Do people hold both hands? This had never seemed so complicated with Ali.

“Okay, okay – so what I want to do is find a place for Mr. Miyagi's tree shop. Surprise him with the lease.”

He blinked. “But won't that cost money? Like, wasn't that the whole problem in the first place?”

“Yeah, but I figure I can just use my money from the ice-breaking competition,” Daniel said blithely.

Johnny stopped walking. It took a few steps for Daniel to notice he was no longer beside him and look around.

“Your money,” he said. “From the ice-breaking competition.”

“Yeah? Back in the summer, in Okinawa.”

Johnny rubbed the back of his neck roughly and stared at him, this moron who tried hitchhiking across the country a few months ago because he was oh-so-broke. Daniel finally seemed to understand his frustration. He rolled his eyes.

“Oh, gimme a break, Johnny. Don't start, okay? That money was for

something special – I mean, it was supposed to be for college, but that's what Mr. Miyagi said, *I* never said it. And I've thought about it a lot, and I think this is what I want to do with it. I mean, I wouldn't have won the money in the first place if he hadn't taught me how to do it." He paused and reflected. "Wouldn't have had to compete in the first place, if he hadn't bet on me. Though maybe I shouldn't've been talking to loud next to the guys with the ice, think they took issue with that. Some people can't handle constructive criticism."

Screw handholding, Johnny thought. Time to play to his strengths.

He grabbed Daniel up and swung him over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, smirking at his slight yelp of surprise. He spun them twice, because it felt like a thing to do.

"You are so stupid," he said and started walking again.

"What the hell, Johnny, you don't just pick a guy up out of the blue like this," came his voice over his shoulder. "You have to let me prepare myself, so I can focus. Appreciate it." He sighed and shifted in his grip. "Though this feels more undignified than sexy. *Not* my favorite position. Take note."

"I thought you were mad at your sensei. Now you're going to get him a whole shop?"

"I am mad. Well – that's overstating things, I'm annoyed with him. But what's that got to do with anything? I'm a reasonable person, I can compartmentalize." He drummed his hands on Johnny's back for a few seconds. "Look, all the blood's rushing to my head, you wanna maybe go over behind that brush over there and try the beach sex again?"

Bobby & Reading Between the Lines

He had budgeted approximately two hours between dinner and a study session in the library for free time, and like some kind of fool he decided to spend part of it talking to a buddy from high school. Or rather, trying to talk to him: if he was home; if he took Bobby's call; if he wasn't too drunk or moody.

He'd had slightly more luck getting Johnny on the phone after he got back from his mysterious business trip out east – no, seriously, that's what the guy called it – but that wasn't saying much because Johnny, well, Johnny didn't say much. Phones were here to stay and had been for several generations, but try telling that to Johnny Lawrence. He'd probably be happy if people were still using the telegraph all the time.

(HEY BOBBY STOP BACK IN TOWN STOP WAS OUT OF TOWN STOP ALL GOOD STOP WANT TO GET SOME BEERS SOMETIME STOP THIS IS JOHNNY BY THE WAY STOP ran the ticker tape in Bobby's imagination.)

What Bobby did know, from his mom and the gossip circuit at the country club, was that Laura Lawrence was seeking a divorce, and had hired the slickest shark in the business. His mom didn't like Laura and had other things to add about *that*, but Bobby tried not to listen. He'd always liked Johnny's mom.

So he sat in his dorm, a plate holding the demolished remains of his dinner at his elbow, and dialed the new number that would, theoretically, connect him to his friend. The phone rang twice before being answered.

“You have reached the Household of the Liberated Lawrences.”

“Uh – hi, Mrs. Lawrence? It's Bobby.”

“Bobby Brown! Always nice to hear a friendly voice – and please, you can start calling Ms. Lawrence. Or, hell, wait. I bet I could rock a Miss.” She made an absent, considering noise, and if she wasn't Johnny's mom, he'd assume she was just joking. But the Lawrences were weird, and he had no doubt she was genuinely thinking the possibility over, like any woman over the age of thirty who had a kid could walk around calling herself *Miss*.

Best not to touch that one directly. “I hear you are within your right

to go by whatever you wish," he said, shifting on the hard wooden desk chair that came with his room.

"Heard that, did you," she said dryly, which meant she knew about the gossip. "Anyway, I take it you are calling for Johnny. You are in luck, he just got in." And then she must've covered the receiver with her hand or something and shouted for Johnny; Bobby could hear a muffled returning shout. Her voice returned, clear again, "He'll be right along, he said. So tell me, how's college?"

He talked for a minute or two about Pitzer and Claremont, by now extremely well-practiced at answering *how's college* questions from his parents. He knew he'd have to face such inquiries in triplicate come Thanksgiving, so more practice never hurt.

"Okay, here he comes – it was *so* good hearing from you, Bobby. I'm glad you called him," she said, and as a parting sentiment, it didn't *not* make him suspicious that something was going on over there.

"Hey, Bobby, what's up," said Johnny, as if it was last year and they'd just talked the day before. But Bobby was not going to try getting into anything over the phone, not with this guy.

"Party tomorrow night just off campus. You coming? You're coming."

"Uh, well," said Johnny, and Bobby struck fast.

"C'mon, man. College chicks, kegs, and – right, me. That guy you've been dodging for a couple months. You come over here, we party, you sleep on my floor. It'll be great."

"Great, yeah. Great, sounds great."

"So you're coming." He tipped his chair on its back legs and studied the map on the wall above his desk.

"I gotta – I gotta think about it, there might be—"

Lord lend him strength and patience. "Johnny, man, whoever she is, just bring her along." And when Johnny didn't respond immediately, he added, "Yeah, you think I don't remember the first six months you dated Ali and disappeared off the face of the earth? You are so predictable, man."

Some guys just got like that with relationships; they start dating a girl and drop all their friends like they can't think about anything or

anyone else. Bobby had never understood it, and it wasn't that he'd never been serious about a girl, but he was a practical and laid back kind of guy. Johnny got too intense with some stuff. Most stuff.

“Look, okay, I'll be there,” said Johnny, sounding a little fed up, “Where is it?”

“Just come by my dorm, we'll head over. You bringing the girl?”

“...No, no I don't think so.”

Bobby rolled his eyes. “Suit yourself. But if you spend the entire night moping, I'm going to empty an entire keg down the front of your jeans.”

“I'm not gonna mope. I don't mope.”

Bobby bit back the noise he wanted to make about that. “Whatever. Look, can you get here by six? We can pre-game, and you can tell me about what the hell you've been doing the past couple months before the others get here.”

“Who all is coming?” And there was something strange in his voice, Bobby didn't think he was imagining that.

“Tommy and Jim. Wasn't able to get a hold of Dutch, but honestly, the idea of Dutch anywhere near my campus is kind of horrifying, so I'm alright with that.” It was one thing to have some wild friends from high school, but another if they were the type to try lighting swimming pools on fire (and somehow almost succeeding).

“Tommy and Jim. Yeah, alright, that should be good. Six, I can do that – but fuck, Bobby, I wish you'd went somewhere closer.”

And then Bobby did make a noise, because the Lord had apparently skimped on the patience. “Dude, weren't you driving to like, Monterey and shit *all the time* last summer? Claremont has nothing on that. It's not even two hours – especially not with the way you drive.”

“Right,” said Johnny, “Yeah, I know.”

“I have to go study now, and I'm sure you have to go jerk off to pictures of your new girlfriend—”

“Oh, fuck you, man—”

“—so I'll let you go,” he finished, unperturbed. “See you tomorrow.”

And then Johnny hung up, because in the antiquated telegraphy of his mind, that was how phone conversations ended. Bobby shook his head and put the phone back into the cradle. Some guys.

Johnny vs Optics

Johnny came back to a ready stance and breathed for a couple beats. He relaxed out of it and looked around at Daniel.

“Look at you, remembering all the steps,” said Daniel, and one thing was definitely true: he was looking at Johnny. “You practice it while I was in Parsippany?”

“Yeah, couple times.” Johnny reached for his water bottle and took a drink. He gestured around the pool house. “Not a whole lot else to do.”

It was a little before noon and no one was around except for a maid in the main house and a gardener out front. Johnny had forbidden Daniel from coming around before ten, and part of it was to avoid people noticing, yeah, but mostly he just didn't want to get up that early. Daniel hadn't asked, but if he did, Johnny was sticking to that.

“When you said you were living in a pool house, I guess I didn't really know what that meant,” he said when he first arrived, craning his head up to look at the tall, sunny interior. “Why you complaining? This is nicer than any place I've ever lived – except Mr. Miyagi's,” he added loyally.

“This isn't really a place,” Johnny had responded, because he wasn't sure how else to put it. The crappy apartment they'd lived in when he was a kid was a place. Daniel's sensei's dojo-slash-garden house was a place. Even a hotel room was a place. The pool house just... wasn't, and he didn't know why.

So they did the kata together in the clear open space of the front room, and then Daniel flopped back on a lounge chair.

“Not a lot to do, huh,” he said, watching him. “So you just – what, work out and dream a little dream of me, and drink?”

Johnny folded his arms and thought about it, but: yeah, basically. The summary made him sound a little pathetic, but Daniel didn't know his regimen. Didn't seem fair.

“You think a lot of yourself, you know that?” because seriously: dream a little dream of him? So what if Johnny did, at least he didn't go around talking about it like that.

“That's not fair,” protested Daniel, putting his hands behind his head. “I also think a lot about you. I mean – take this, this outfit right here. That's. Let's talk about this.”

Johnny's brow knit. He glanced down at his work-out clothes, but they remained as they'd been the whole time: a pair of shorts and cut-off shirt. “What? I was conditioning earlier. What am I supposed to wear, jeans? Sweats? It's like eighty-five degrees in here, Daniel.”

“Hey, that wasn't a complaint.”

“You know, I could toss you in the pool,” he said, throwing himself down in the second lounge chair. “It's like five steps to the door and then you're a goner.”

Daniel sat up and looked at him, eyes narrowing; Johnny went still, reflexive wariness.

“We really need to work on your responses to admiration," he reflected.

Johnny's face twisted. “Why? I'm great, I know that.”

“The hostility you have to honest appreciation is frankly heartbreaking. I mean, if *I* had someone hanging around, constantly heaping praise on me—”

“Oh, so that's what this is. You want me to talk more about how hot you are. Figures.” He looked away and that was a mistake, because next thing he knew, Daniel was joining him on the lounge chair, which wasn't built for two dudes. It creaked beneath him, but held. For the moment.

“You should wear this shirt,” said Daniel, meditative as he slid his hands up Johnny's sides, “every day.”

It was harder to pretend to be annoyed when his hands were on him. “Yeah?”

“Mmhm. I'm gonna be a very busy guy soon, can't be wasting time with uncooperative clothing. There is something to be said for,” and he bent his head to kiss his stomach, “ease of access.”

If Johnny was any more accessible to Daniel, he kind of thought they'd be a local scandal. And he thought it was a little weird that Daniel was already talking about this like he was some big, important

businessman and Johnny his cabana boy. Sure, he was living in a pool house, but it wasn't like Daniel wasn't also crashing somewhere.

He cleared his throat and stopped Daniel from reaching for the waistband of his shorts, never mind the obvious hopeful interest making a show of itself in that direction. Daniel looked up, dark eyes already a little out of it, attention elsewhere (the shorts).

Johnny got a hand around each of his wrists and hauled him up his chest. “What do you mean, you're going to be busy soon?”

Daniel compromised by putting his arms around his neck and snugging himself up tight against his waist. Johnny could feel his hardening dick against his bare abdomen. Damn, this shirt was apparently a really good idea. The Avanti of shirts, zero to absolutely dying for it in five seconds.

“Because of the tree shop,” he said, distracted, tracing his nose along Johnny's jawline. “I'm gonna help him run it, of course. New business takes a lot of work, probably.”

And then he opened his mouth hot and wet over Johnny's neck, and Johnny realized, shit, he *was* going to be the cabana boy if he didn't figure something out.

Johnny vs Details

Bobby sat on his bed and Johnny on the desk chair, both holding a beer.

Bobby waited.

Johnny rubbed the back of his neck. “So what happened was. No, well – you remember. That thing about, about me? The um. The Mike Walker thing? Right, yeah. So, Sid found out. And he kicked me out of the house, said he was going to take the car. It's fine. Now. I mean, it's crazy where I have to park her, you should see how far I have to go from the house just to make sure the prick doesn't try something, it's practically a commute just to get my own damn car—”

“*Johnny*,” said Bobby tightly. His eyes have gone wide and, right.

“So. I was driving around, trying to figure things out—”

“Yeah,” he snorted, shaking his head with something that was very much not a smile. “I bet, man. I bet.”

“You want to hear this or not? So I'm driving around, and I bump into – into Daniel LaRusso, okay.”

“Daniel?” And Bobby sounded confused.

“Right, and I figure, what the hell, anywhere's better than the Valley, and this, this buys me time. Just needed some time. To figure things out. So that's what I did.”

“Wait, back up. What did you do?”

“Oh. Sorry – I drove him to New Jersey. Well, Chicago. And, and then New Jersey. I mean, I guess you go through Chicago no matter what, so. Yeah.”

“Okay?” And Bobby still sounded confused.

“Yeah.” He thought about it and rubbed his palms on his jeans. He added, “We're dating now.”

And now he sounded really, really confused. “Who is?”

“Me and Daniel?” And Bobby's confusion must have been contagious

or something, because he's got *Johnny* sounding confused too.

Bobby stared at him.

He thought about it some more, racking his brain; there had to be something else he could mention. And then it hit him.

“Oh, and in Texas I got into a bar fight. I won – three on one, man.” He held up his fingers, to emphasize the odds, because that was important. “I mean, Daniel was there, but he didn't really do anything except start it. I finished it.” He nodded; smirked a little. “Three on one. Cowboy hick types, big guys. Took 'em all out, except I guess one of them wasn't out-out, because he smashed a bottle over my head right after. But technically – I still won. Three on one. Not bad for a guy who hasn't fought since last December, right?”

“Smashed a bottle on your head, you say?” said Bobby, checking. Johnny nodded, and something like realization came over his friend's face. “Got it. Head injury – explains everything.”

His smirk dropped. “Hey.”

Bobby shook his head. He put his elbows on his knees and slowly rubbed his face.

“Oh, *what*?” demanded Johnny.

Johnny vs College Parties, 7 PM

“This really isn't a joke?” asked Bobby, one beer later.

Johnny didn't really know how to respond except to shake his head. The idea of his relationship with Daniel being something people could laugh at, find funny – that hadn't even occurred to him. It'd be like if someone pointed at a mountain and laughed. Who'd do that; what's the punchline? His insides twisted a little in confusion.

“Okay,” said Bobby. “Wow. I, uh – man, Johnny. I didn't even know you were into him. I mean, last year, was that—”

“I wasn't,” he said quickly. “Last year. I mean, I don't think I was. This has nothing to do with all that.”

He looked at Johnny for a long moment. “Must've been some trip,” he said finally.

“Yeah, I guess.”

“How serious is this?” he asked, running a hand back through his sandy fringe. “Like, are you going to tell the guys?”

Johnny's grip dented his can. “We don't – there's no reason they need to know, right? Not right now, anyway.”

Bobby accepted that without argument, probably because he realized the mostly likely response the others would have to the news would be a big of drag on that night's party.

“So it's not serious,” he said, like he was double-checking.

“I don't know what you mean by that,” Johnny replied honestly.

Serious in high school was a more clear cut status. If you were going steady, you did public displays of affection, maybe shared your lockers or you gave the girl your jacket. You had sex. You met the girl's parents.

Out of school though? He and Daniel had the sex part down. Laura was going to insist on meeting Daniel sometime soon, probably. (Did that make Johnny the girl?) He wondered if he was supposed to give Daniel one of his jackets. (That would totally make Daniel the girl.) There was equal chance that he'd make fun of Johnny or blow him.

(Who was he kidding, he'd probably try to do both at once.)

“I think it's kinda serious, maybe,” he told him.

“Well, fuck,” said Bobby, and they finished their second beer.

Tommy and Jim arrived a little later, and it was an immediate relief how little things had changed. They tussled for a few minutes on the lawn outside Bobby's dorm, Johnny grinning and knocking Tommy on his ass while deflecting Jim's blows. Bobby acted like everything was normal, and maybe he could be too.

They grabbed some beers and walked across the campus that was actually apparently part of the larger campus of the five colleges. (“Why don't they just give up and call it one school?” asked Jim, confused; “There's strength in a union,” replied Bobby, “and, I dunno, probably tax benefits, too.”) It was like the world had suddenly transformed into a strange alternate reality where everyone was young and hot and walked everywhere instead of driving. Also there were a lot of like, trees. Johnny couldn't decide if he liked it or not.

“So is this a frat party?” asked Tommy.

“We don't really do the whole Greek life thing,” replied Bobby, and he managed to sound only a little superior about it.

“I was thinking about pledging.”

A passing group for four girls smiled and checked them out, and Johnny smiled back reflexively. He looked over his shoulder for a couple seconds before remembering the conversation. He twisted back around.

“Why would you do that? Don't you remember Fraternity Row? Who sees that and goes, sign me up.”

“I'd have a total leg up,” argued Tommy. “After Cobra Kai? You kidding? Upperclassmen'll be like, eat this onion, you worm! Hardest part will be not laughing.”

And yeah, it was hard to argue with that.

Johnny vs College Parties, 9 PM

“Just once,” Bobby was saying loudly to Jim over the music and crowd, “I don't know, just once, I was thinking we could go to a party without someone trying to show off.”

“Why?” asked Jim, confused. What a pal, he was always so supportive.

“This isn't showing off,” said Johnny. He gave Jim his beer, because he was going to need both hands for this.

“Then what is it?”

“Good, clean, honest competition,” shouted Tommy from the top of the stairs. Johnny nodded and pointed up at him, because yeah, that.

The house hosting the party had this crazy double-wide staircase going up the middle of it, like someone had designed the place around the need to move a grand piano. And like, you didn't just see something like that without doing something about it.

Tommy had spent twenty minutes earlier going on and on about MAC training at Cal State – that's what he called it, *MAC* training, and Johnny had so far refused to ask what that meant. He'd been on a college campus for only a few hours and was already kinda fed up with all the acronyms and lingo. But whatever it was, Tommy really talked it up, made it sound like god's gift to karate.

The idea that he was officially moving on from Cobra Kai made Johnny feel a little weird. Even though they all technically already had. So he challenged Tommy to a handstand race on the stairs. In his head, it made sense.

“I just don't see why we have to turn absolutely everything into a competition,” said Bobby, leaning his elbow on the stair railing. “We're not kids anymore.”

“You just beat Johnny at shotgunning beer,” said Jim.

“That doesn't count,” said Bobby.

“It was a *tie*,” he snapped over his shoulder.

“Are we doing this or not?” called Tommy from the top of the stairs

and yeah, they were doing this.

My money's on blondie, said a girl to her friend. People had bunched up two-and-three people thick along either side of the bottom of the stairs to watch.

Johnny caught her eye and winked. Where a high school girl might have blushed, she merely raised her eyebrows at him and slowly smiled. Something about the combination of confident amusement and appreciation made him think of Daniel, so he hurriedly turned forward again and focused on the race.

If Daniel was here, he probably wouldn't even be watching the race. He'd be off in a corner somewhere talking to someone about something boring, and upon hearing the news of Johnny's incredible triumph, he'd wave it off airily and say to whoever he was talking to, *oh, that's just my moron, yeah.* He loved the muscles but disdained any use outside their manhandling of him, and jesus fucking christ, Johnny should really get his head in the game.

“Okay,” said Bobby, sounding deeply bored, “first to reach the other end wins. You fall, you lose... am I forgetting anything? No? Okay, ready?”

Johnny locked eyes with Tommy at the top of the stairs. They hadn't been able to agree which was harder, going up or down, so they'd flipped a coin. He thought going up was clearly more difficult because, like, gravity.

“Go!”

People cheered and called out.

He kicked up into the hand stand. That was the easy part. Maintaining his balance on one hand while reaching for the first step was a little trickier; switching to the other hand while pushing up was even harder. But he fucking did it. He hadn't heard Tommy fall yet, so he focused on the next step and kept going.

“Like, I'm sure this is *really hard* and everything,” said someone after a minute and four steps, “but I kinda thought they'd be faster.”

Somewhere in the middle of the stairs, they finally crossed paths.

Johnny gritted out, “Starting to weaken?” The pressure of blood in his head was sort of incredible.

“You wish, bitch," gasped Tommy.

And it was hard to say if it was an accident when their legs knocked together in the air, or if Tommy was trying to pull something, but regardless, Johnny reflexively knocked his knee back in retaliation. Beneath them, the crowd started cheering again as they both forgot about the race and started struggling against each other.

It only took a few seconds for them to lose their balance and crash down. It kind of hurt.

Johnny grunted and pushed up against the bannister, hand coming up to cup the back of his head.

“Well, I guess you both lose,” said Bobby from below.

Johnny blinked at Tommy trying to straighten himself out without tumbling down the rest of the stairs, and looked up at how far he had to go to get to the top.

“I was further along,” said Johnny, raising an unsteady fist in the air. “So I win.”

“*Bullshit*,” groaned Tommy.

Johnny vs College Parties, 11 PM

“So what's up with you guys, anyway?” asked Tommy.

They were in the basement of the house playing beer pong. The floor above them pounded dully with the music, and their voices echoed slightly around the unfinished concrete floor and walls. It was cooler down here, and Johnny kind of wished he hadn't abandoned his jacket somewhere upstairs.

Bobby stirred against the corner, looking around. “Who are you talking to?”

Tommy paused and pointed kind of flatly between he and Johnny, a nonverbal *duh* on his face.

Johnny didn't look around at Bobby. “Nothing's up, except our score.” He studied the table closely; took aim; threw the ball. It landed with a splash in the second-to-last cup at the top of the triangle. “Ha! Drink.”

Tommy fished the ball out and downed the beer. He threw the empty cup over his shoulder. “Okay, Jim, your turn. Jim?”

Jim was sitting on a milk crate over by the hot water heater, blinking into space. He was such a lightweight. It was a real handicap, having him as a partner; sucked to be Tommy.

He looked up and around at them. “Huh?”

Tommy nudged him with his foot. “Your turn, man.”

“Wait,” said Johnny suddenly. “What time is it?”

Bobby checked his watch. “Just hit eleven.”

“Why, you worried about turning into a pumpkin?” snickered Tommy.

“That's the carriage,” said Jim, standing a little unsteadily. “The carriage turns into the pumpkin. The mice into horses, and the. The horse and dog into servants.” He looked up to find them all staring at him, and he grew confused. “What?”

“I have to make a phone call,” announced Johnny.

“Oh,” said Tommy, and Jim joined him a second later, sounding only

half-aware of what they were oh-ing. “*Ohh.*”

He was already walking towards the stairs. “Shut up.”

“How did we miss the signs?” called Tommy. “Boyfriend Johnny back again! Bobby, did you know about this?”

“Since when does he tell me anything?” was the last thing Johnny heard before he was taking the steps three at a time back up to the bright, loud party on the main floor.

He navigated through the thick, quick-moving press of people in the front hall and living room and squeezed into the kitchen, which was already trashed with empties and spilled liquor, shattered chips all over the floor and counter. It was slightly less crowded in there, mostly just a thoroughfare for people making their way between the living room and yard out back, which he heard had a pool.

Johnny located the phone and grabbed the receiver. He squinted at the number pad and slowly, methodically punched in the right number.

He listened to the rings but a pair of girls passed him just as the call connected, so he said loudly, “Hey, man. What's up, how. How are you.” And then he added, “yeah, cool,” for some reason.

After a second, Daniel laughed a little. “Oh, it's drunk Johnny. Hello, drunk Johnny.”

He tucked the phone close to his ear and then tucked himself into the corner beside the fridge. “Hi,” he said, quiet and very serious.

He slowly slid down the wall, phone cord stretching out above him and sat with his knees to his chest. From there, he could see someone was passed out beneath the kitchen table. They were only wearing one shoe. He wondered what happened.

“I take it you're having a good time.”

“It's alright. I mean, yeah.” He put his head back against the wall and stared at the ceiling. “Be better if you were here.”

“Oh, *boy*. You got it bad.” He could hear Daniel's smile in his voice.

Wished he could see it.

“Shut up.”

“If I shut up, this conversation's gonna be real short. I mean, unless you'd like to lead for once. Maybe you should lead for once.”

“I can lead. You saying I can't lead?”

Daniel made a slight sigh like he was flopping backwards. “Dazzle me, Johnny.”

And he always liked how Daniel said his name. He said it like it was something else, like *babe* or something. Even though it was just like, his name. It was nice.

He cast his eyes up to watch as a group of people walked past to the deck. He waited for the door to slide shut and said, “I think Bobby's mad at me.”

Daniel suddenly sounded a lot more alert. “Why would he be mad at you?”

“I don't know,” he said. He thought about the night so far. “I mean, but he's definitely being kinda weird. I don't even think it's the... you-and-me-dating thing.”

“Oh,” said Daniel after a second. “So you – wow, Johnny. Look at you, 2 for 2, hey.” And Johnny really liked that, because it made it sound like he was winning something. He smirked and nodded to himself, because yeah. “Okay, so, it sounds like you should just talk to him. Before it goes any longer and becomes a Thing. You don't want it to become a Thing, you don't handle Things well.”

He frowned. “I handle Things fine.”

“Your history of fleeing across state lines with a stolen car would say otherwise.”

Fleeing, he didn't like that word. It made him sound like some dumb, desperate kid instead of like, a desperado. Is that how Daniel thought about it? That was so wrong. Johnny showed up like a cowboy with a kickass steed and saved him from murder by highway perverts or a really boring drive in a minivan, and this is the thanks he gets?

“...not to say I didn't appreciate my knight in shining armor,” Daniel

was saying in his ear, and Johnny hurriedly started listening again, “but I just think now that you've started facing your problems head-on, you should stick to it. Just – ask him what's up.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“*Yeah, okay*,” Daniel mimicked and if Johnny was there or he was here, he'd totally have that kid in a headlock right now. Or a kiss. Either one.

“What did you do today?” he asked after a moment. He kicked out his legs before him, causing a guy to startle and jump quick to avoid tripping. They exchanged confused glares.

In his ear, Daniel's voice went a little weird, vague and sort of distant. “Uh – nothing, really. I looked at some potential places for Mr. Miyagi's shop. Think I have a couple good options, maybe I'll show you, if you want.”

Johnny followed the guy he almost tripped with narrowed eyes, in case he wanted to try and make something out of nothing. He said, distracted, “Yeah, 'course.”

“Hey, Johnny?”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe I wish you were here too.”

And shit, Daniel was totally right. He did have it bad.

Johnny vs College Parties, 1:30 AM

“Nope,” announced Tommy, after ten minutes. “Here's good.”

And he sat down heavily on the lawn of the quad. Jim staggered two steps to the left, looked around, and promptly sat as well, so then they had two cobras down. This could not stand. Literally.

Bobby backtracked and kicked Tommy. He didn't really hold back. “Up. Up, you moron. We can't hang around here, the CSOs will give us shit.”

“We could take them,” said Tommy, which Johnny thought was a fair point.

“I don't,” said Jim, reclining back on one elbow and squinting up at the sky. He heaved a heavy sigh. “I don't think I want to fight anymore. I'm done fighting.”

“On your feet,” barked Bobby, walking over and hauling him up. Jim swayed, clutching his elbow. He looked like he was going to puke.

Johnny offered Tommy a hand up, which he took and immediately tried to use to yank Johnny down to the grass. But Johnny expected this and braced his feet against the pull. He smirked at him. Tommy scowled.

“Onward, Christian soldiers,” said Bobby, dragging Jim's arm over his shoulder.

And onward they went across the quiet campus.

Tommy passed out before his body even hit the rug in Bobby's room, and Jim disappeared somewhere. Johnny wandered the hallways of the floor for a while before giving up and going into the common room for some water.

He went back to Bobby's room and stared down at Tommy's snoring face. He grabbed another beer and left again. He stood in the hallway and cracked open the can, thought about what Daniel had said while drinking it.

Eventually, he straightened his shoulders and marched down to the bathroom, where he knew Bobby was probably engaging in his prissy nighttime ritual. Even drunk, the dude washed his face. It was so weird. Apparently acne left lasting trauma or something.

He was maybe a little too forceful in throwing open the door, and it crashed loudly against the opposite wall. Over by the sink, Bobby winced into the mirror.

“Another beer? Should you be having another?” he asked.

“Do you hear yourself?” demanded Johnny. “You're a disgrace to college kids everywhere.”

“You could've brought me one,” he said darkly, vigorously scrubbing soap into his chin.

So Johnny turned around and went back to the room and grabbed another beer. He paused, thinking about the conversation ahead, and then bent and grabbed the whole box. He returned to the bathroom and plopped a can down on the edge of the sink. He stepped past Bobby and jumped up to sit on the counter by the sinks, people's personal baskets of toiletries and shampoo and shit clattering back. He looked around the large empty bathroom, at the row of toilet stalls and row of shower stalls.

He drank and kicked his legs and said, “Are you mad at me.”

Bobby turned the tap on, stuck his fingers under the running water to test the temperature, and said, “Nope.”

He nodded. “Okay, good.”

Bobby slapped the tap off with enough force to practically break the sink and shouted with a voice that rang harshly against the tile of the room, “Goddamnit, Johnny!”

Johnny pointed. “Fucking knew it.”

He threw his arms out, heedless of the soap still dripping down his face. “How many years we been friends, huh? How many years? Your stepdad kicks you out of the house and you don't come to me? You'd rather run away than come to me for help?”

“What could you have done?” asked Johnny, confused.

“I don't know,” he said. “But something, I would have tried something. You didn't even give me chance. You'd rather go off on some crazy road trip and start dating Daniel fucking LaRusso than give me a chance. I thought we were friends, man.”

“We are friends. It wasn't like that,” said Johnny. “That just happened.”

“How does something like that *just happen*?”

He shrugged. He looked at Bobby for a moment longer. “Look, I'm sorry, I wasn't really thinking. I couldn't – really, think. I was out driving, and I was gonna come back, but then I ran into him, and it just. It felt like the thing to do. I probably would've called you, otherwise. But the thing with Daniel,” and it was so fucking weird to talk about it aloud, he couldn't believe he was doing this; the awesome power of eight or nine or eleven beers, man, “that's – that's me coming to you now, right? I wouldn't just tell anyone about that. You're my best friend, man.”

Bobby stared at him and after a moment, he nodded a little stiffly.

After another moment, someone across the room coughed.

Johnny paled and dropped his beer. Bobby met his wide eyes and they both twisted around to look at the row of toilets. They crossed the room in an instant and pushed open the door to the last stall.

Jim blinked up at them from his position on the ground, already wincing. The toilet bowl he was clutching was full of brown-yellow vomit, mostly liquid.

“Why doesn't anyone tell *me* things?” asked Jim weakly.

Johnny vs College Parties, 3 AM

They sat on the floor against the tiled wall opposite the sinks and opened some more beers. Johnny was cold with mortification, his movements jerky and stiff, and he didn't understand why the beer hadn't yet fixed this.

“I'm cool with it,” Jim was still earnestly saying, and he kept leaning forward to speak past Bobby to him, which Johnny responded to by trying to sink into the wall. He was unsuccessful. “I mean, I get why you wouldn't want to tell anyone, but I'm *so* cool with it. I mean, I mean. Johnny. Johnny, you know I've always liked Elton John.”

“*Elton John,*” he cried out, hands slapping the floor, feet thumping: absolutely beside himself.

Bobby made vague shushing noises and dug his elbow into his ribs. “He didn't mean it like that.”

“Elton John doesn't look like he can do ten push-ups!”

Jim hesitated and stared down at his can, thinking deeply. His shoulders slumped. “I. I don't know any other gay guys. I'm sorry, man.”

Bobby waved his can. “...and you know, I just, I feel like last year was really hard on all of us, we had a lot of stuff going on. I mean, we lost our dojo, man, and it was so messed up how that all went down—”

“Yeah,” said Johnny.

“Totally,” said Jim.

“And like, we couldn't stop Sensei when he went after you, man, we couldn't do *anything*. I think I spent months really questioning, like, who I was, who I'm meant to be. What kind of, of man I'm supposed to be. I don't wanna be like that. You know? I want to be like *that*.”

“Right,” said Johnny.

“Yeah,” said Jim.

“Like someone people can rely on, you know? Wanna be that. And so, Johnny – when you told me about your stepdad kicking you out, I just felt like it had been on me, man. It was on me and I failed you, man, I failed you *again*—”

“No,” said Johnny, “Hey, man. No."

“I really miss you guys,” said Jim. He was hunched forward over his crossed legs, turning to look back at them, tears running unchecked down his flushed face. “Like I feel like I don't know anybody anymore, and it *sucks*. The kids in my classes don't care about karate at all, and I don't know what's cool. It's so confusing, all the time.”

“I get. I get what you mean. I miss you guys too," said Bobby, and Johnny darted a look at him, because his voice was really—

Oh god.

Well, Johnny wasn't going to fucking cry. Someone had to be a man here, and it might as well be the queer.

“Freddie Mercury!” said Jim suddenly. “Freddie Mercury!”

“Oh,” said Johnny. “Yeah. He kinda is, huh.”

“He could totally do ten pushups, *and* he's got a great core,” said Bobby.

“I don't really know what to do now,” said Johnny quietly. Jim was asleep against Bobby's shoulder, mouth hanging open, and Bobby was blinking slowly and kept nodding off. “I mean. Without Cobra Kai or school – I just kind of have nothing to do all day. Everyone's moving forward and. I guess I'm scared I'll be left behind.”

Bobby widened his eyes and shook his head a little, like he was trying to clear water from his ears. He looked over at Johnny, head weaving a little in the air.

“We're not gonna let that happen,” he said. “And, and anyway – you have Daniel now, you said.” And he was so drunk, he didn't even sound weird saying his name.

“Yeah.” Johnny brought his knees up and smiled a little. “Yeah, I have Daniel.”

Johnny vs High Stakes Infiltration

The drive back to the valley the next morning was almost an out of body experience. Johnny's eyes remained locked on the road, and he forgot to blink for long stretches of time. His hands were very tight on the wheel as he carefully piloted his girl home.

Four hours of sleep on the floor of Bobby's common room, and he thought he might still technically be drunk, even if he didn't *feel* drunk, because when you drink for ten hours your body at some point kind of shrugs and goes, well alright guess this is what life is now, best get on with it. Except that feeling was a lie, but whatever.

He felt like someone had scooped out his brain, rotated it, and put it back in upside down.

He should probably go home, take a shower. Sleep. But it was a Saturday, so his mom would probably be home, and there's no real way to effectively sneak around a pool house.

So he decided to test how effectively he could sneak around a dojo instead.

Step One: parking. Good. And once that was done, he could breathe easy, knowing the Avanti was safe from his not-a-hangover driving. Important.

Step Two: getting past the garden fence. Not difficult because Daniel's sensei didn't seem to believe in even basic security measures; maybe people didn't steal or vandalize shit in Okinawa?

Wait, no – actual Step Two was making sure Mr. Miyagi was not in the garden before attempting to scale the fence. That would be really awkward, landing on the grass and then looking up to find the man like, watering some tulips.

So actually, no – the *real* Step Two was climbing that tree over there and peeking into the garden. Okay.

The garden looked clear, so go, go go *go*.

Almost landed on a bush, that was close. So that was Step – what? If

the tree was two, then – okay, so three and four are taken care of and now what? Alright, abandon the numbers, what good did numbers ever do a guy.

Think, think.

Guesthouse, Daniel was staying in the guesthouse. But to get to the guesthouse Johnny had to get up the walk past the main building. This called for shrewd surveillance and an appropriately timed tuck and roll.

(Maybe this whole thing was unnecessary? Daniel mentioned his sensei liked to go fishing many mornings.)

Johnny fetched up against the wall of the guesthouse and pressed his back to the wood, glancing left and right to make sure the coast was still clear. Almost there. Mission going great, he was so fucking good at this?

He reached out and slid the door to the guesthouse open and swiftly slipped inside. He closed it afterward and turned around. Target acquired: the bed—

Which was empty.

Johnny stepped forward and looked around the room, a little lost. His shoulders slumped.

“Early rising little punk,” he muttered after a moment. He kicked a pair of Daniel's jeans that had been abandoned on the floor and sank down glumly on the bed. With the adrenaline of the mission fading away, his hangover was reasserting itself, and it was kinda apocalyptic.

Whatever. He might as well sleep some more. He pulled off his sneakers and tossed them away and then mutinously fell back on the bed, turning his back to the door and pulling the sheet over his head.

The pillow smelled of Daniel.

Johnny vs A Critical Lapse in Vigilance

“Man, oh man. If I could talk to my younger self right now, what would I even say? How would I explain this? 'Daniel, some day you're going to come back to your room and find your bed has been taken over by a six foot tall, one hundred and ninety pound dope with beer leaking from his pores, and it's somehow going to be the best thing in the world'. I mean, he'd think I've gone insane in the future. He'd want to commit me, and I don't blame him.”

Johnny turned his head into the pillow and reached out blindly; the unsuspecting fool took his hand, and he used it to pull him down next to him.

“Ugh,” said Daniel, like he wasn't already happily wiggling backwards, making himself comfortable. “And I just showered.”

“Can always shower again,” mumbled Johnny, tucking his knees in behind the other boy's. He slung an arm around him, flattening his hand against the warm clean skin beneath his bathrobe. “Glad I make you happy. Now shut up. Sleeping.”

“Who said you make me happy? That is not what I said. Maybe I find this whole thing really, really funny. I mean, it's like you materialized out of thin air.”

He tightened his arm. “Shh.”

Daniel sighed. “Hope the car's okay. If Los Angeles had a decent regional transit system, I wouldn't have to worry. You could be just one of a million drunk guys riding a bus somewhere—”

Johnny's eyes snapped open – burning agony from general dehydration and the piercing light surrounding them. He rolled Daniel onto his back. “If you're seriously going to start ranting to me about fucking transit again,” and then his words died like a passing storm because Daniel was blinking softly up at him and Daniel had a black eye.

Johnny vs Sense Memory

You hit someone, and Johnny's hit plenty, and you're really hitting two people: the person in your head and the body in front of you. A while ago, he kind of started to suspect there wasn't as much overlap as he'd always thought.

The person in your head is always larger than the body in front of you. The person in your head is unstoppable, even when the body in front of you is already falling to the ground. The person in your head is still jeering while the body in front of you is gasping out a broken sob.

The last time Daniel looked like this, it was Johnny who did it to him.

Johnny vs Priorities

“I,” said Johnny, and then no more.

Daniel rolled his eyes and shifted to sit up, and Johnny let him slip out of his suddenly nerveless grasp. “Okay, okay. Yeah – surprise! Look, before you laugh or give me shit for this, it was absolutely not my fault. It was like getting caught in a passing rain shower, alright, coulda happened to anybody.”

He'd turned his face away as he talked, but it didn't matter; Johnny could still see the bruise in his head. It was a dark purplish mass covering the outer edge of the eye socket and cheekbone, maybe not centered enough to mess with his vision even at the worst of the swelling – what, the night before?

He tried to remember their phone call, if Daniel had sounded weird at all, but he doesn't remember anything strange. How could he not have heard it in his voice?

“Who,” managed Johnny. “Who was it?”

Daniel twisted around to stare at him, disbelieving, and there it was again. He had broken a blood vessel in his left eye, a blot of violent red marring the white. Johnny wondered if he made a noise when the punch landed.

At his sides, his hands balled into helpless fists.

“Weren't you listening?” said Daniel. “I just said I don't know.”

“I don't understand. How can you not know? You're saying – what, a complete stranger walking down the street stopped and took a swing at you?” He contemplated the number of streets Daniel might walk down on any given day, and the number of complete strangers he might pass, and his vision almost swam with dread.

“Are you *blaming* me?” demanded Daniel.

“No,” he said, confused. He pushed up so he was sitting next to him. He wanted to reach out but— “I mean. I don't know? What the hell happened?”

“Look, I'll make it simple for you: one moment, nothing. Next moment some asshole with hair like Biff from Back to the Future is shoving me,

demanding to know," and here Daniel paused, mouth flinching. Reluctant. He finished, "why I'm not fighting in the All Valley in December."

He understood the individual words, and even the sentences as constructed, but he was still so confused. "Why the hell would some guy care if you're fighting in the All Valley?" No one cared if *Johnny* was fighting in the All Valley, and he was champ two years in a row. Which meant there was something about Daniel.

And he was back to feeling sick.

Daniel ran a hand up through the back of hair and shook his head, looking stumped. "Beats me."

He squinted. "You're sure you didn't know him? He wasn't from Cobra Kai, or one of the other dojos from the tournament?"

"No." And he sounded sure. After a moment he sighed. "Look, can we just drop it for now?"

"What if he comes around again?" he said immediately. Drop it, bullshit. They needed a battle plan. They needed blueprints of the dojo and recon on all its vulnerabilities. Fuck, Johnny was able to get in here by climbing a *tree*.

"He's not gonna – and if he does, I'll handle it, the way I handled it last night."

There was nothing stopping anyone else from climbing that tree.

Daniel smirked sidelong at him and pivoted abruptly, climbing onto Johnny's lap. He leaned his forearms on his shoulders and tipped their foreheads together. From so close, it wasn't really possible to stare at the bruise. And he never thought he could be too distracted to focus on a warm lapful of shower-clean Daniel, but.

Daniel pressed a kiss to his lips and murmured, "Alone here and you in my bed, I think we've wasted enough time talking about some random jerk, don't you?"

Johnny hesitated a moment before returning the touch, his hands slipping through the gaping sides of the bathrobe to hold him; his waist suddenly felt small, his ribs terrifyingly breakable.

He wondered if they should cut down the tree.

Johnny vs It's Not Erectile Dysfunction if He's Not in the Mood, Daniel

And so Daniel wriggled and petted and squeezed; at one point he threw his bathrobe open and gave a shimmy, and even then Johnny could only try to smile. His eye kept being drawn to the bruise.

Daniel's shoulders slumped. His bathrobe slipped down his arms, pooled around his waist like a blue terrycloth boa. “*Really*?” he said, aghast. “Nothing?”

“Sorry you being hurt doesn't get me going,” said Johnny, cheeks heating.

Daniel looked exasperated, and then he looked pleased and fond, and then he seemed to remember he wasn't getting Johnny's dick and went back to looking put out. He looked down at Johnny's stubbornly disinterested lap, and his mouth curved sadly.

The whole thing was one disaster after another. If there was anything more terrible than Daniel with a black eye, it was Daniel with a black eye and morose expression. That he was sulking out of some martyred sense of sex deprivation didn't matter, not to Johnny's gut. Daniel looked sad and his gut thought the world was coming to an end. His gut was pretty stupid.

Daniel sighed and shifted like he was going to get up, and that was no good, so Johnny wrapped his arms around him and pulled him down to the bed, rolled over him.

He'd be safe, so long as he was under Johnny. Anyone coming in would have to get through him first.

“*Mm*,” went Daniel. He shifted beneath him as if to test his hold and, finding himself thoroughly pinned, began to flush. The color crept down his neck and chest. “Better, that's better.”

He grinned a little breathlessly up at Johnny, eyes sparkling with amusement, because he still found his own physical reactions funny. Johnny didn't know how that worked, being amused while turned on, but Daniel's head was a weird place.

And *better* was kissing him, he could at least do that. If he was kissing him, he wasn't looking at the bruise. He could pretend everything was

normal. It was normal for him to claim Daniel's mouth like this: desperate to match the desperate noise Daniel made as he opened immediately for him.

Daniel quickly grew hard. Johnny could feel him pressing against his stomach, hot and firm. He distantly wondered if it was possible to kiss someone to an orgasm. Was it cheating if he let Daniel rub up against him?

He'd decide later.

Johnny vs Next Steps

“Okay, Johnny? You're kind of crushing my ribcage now.”

He grudgingly shifted so the bulk of his mass wasn't directly on Daniel. Then he tightened his arms.

“Seriously, what's with the boa constrictor routine? It's just a black eye. Dime a dozen, man. Don't you remember last year?”

He flinched slightly and finally slid all the way off. He sat up on the edge of the bed.

Behind him, Daniel said, “Oh.”

Johnny stared at the floor and tried to think of a way to change the subject, or move things along. In the realm of dick moves, turning this whole situation around to be about *his* problem had to be like, magnum-sized.

Daniel's long, slender arms came around him, and he pressed up over Johnny like he was asking for a piggyback ride. He dug the point of his chin into the muscle of his shoulder until Johnny twitched.

“You, uh. You know I forgave you for all that, right?” he said. “I mean, it wasn't you.”

But the thing was – it was him. He did it. He wished like hell he could blame someone else, claim demonic possession, maybe, but The Exorcist was fiction and he was just a kid who'd done shitty things sometimes.

“Yeah,” he said.

That wasn't a good enough response, apparently, because Daniel's arms curled around his neck, and now who was the boa constrictor? Daniel nudged the back of his head with his nose, followed it up with a kiss.

“Look, I'm not saying if you want to devote yourself to making it up to me through excessive acts of oral worship, I'm gonna say *no*, but Johnny – Johnny, please. Shake it off, man. It's not a big deal. I'm fine. You're fine. Absolutely nothing here is different than it was yesterday morning.”

“Okay,” he said, and he reached up to hold his wrist.

“Okay?” said Daniel, sounding almost suspicious.

“Yeah, okay.”

He kissed his hair again. “Okay.”

“Guess I should head home and take a shower,” he said a little while later. “Change my clothes.”

“Oh no,” said Daniel, “but I was enjoying the return of Dirty Jeans Johnny. Got me feeling all nostalgic over here.”

Johnny scowled at him. “These jeans aren't dirty. I've only worn them,” and then he stopped talking, because he wasn't stupid and there was no way to end the sentence in a way that wouldn't earn further mockery.

Daniel lifted his eyebrows and smirked. “Yeah,” he said, drawing the word out. “That's what I thought.”

Maybe there was no way to avoid further mockery. Maybe it was like trying to stop the rain or the tides.

Anyway, Johnny had other problems to deal with, namely: he couldn't leave Daniel alone. His sensei wasn't back yet, and anyone could bust into the dojo. And he kind of got the feeling that Daniel wasn't going to cooperate if Johnny explained that he couldn't be trusted to be left alone – he'd get exasperated and then when he realized Johnny was serious, he'd get incredulous, which would quickly turned into offended, probably, so Johnny needed to focus, he needed to collect all his wits and deep understanding of the LaRusso psyche and come up with something completely foolproof. (It needed to be foolproof because Daniel was a fool.)

“Wanna come meet my mom?” he asked.

Daniel turned around, frozen in the act of pulling on a sock. He stared at Johnny, mouth a little open.

"Well?" said Johnny, kinda bullish.

“What – now? Like. Now? Today?”

“Yeah.”

Daniel's eyes flicked away and back. “Um – okay.”

Fucking foolproof.

Daniel vs The Thing About Meeting Parents

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The thing about meeting parents was, he wasn't good at it.

Past experiences ranged from awkward (the Mills; kicking loose a brick on their front... whatever you call those enormous steps – stoop seemed like an inadequate term, it's not like he could picture anyone hanging out there with a beer or something like people did on stoops back in his old neighborhood in Newark; anyway, yeah so there was the thing with the brick, and then how he hadn't planned ahead on a location for the date which probably screamed *deadbeat*, like he could see the fear in their eyes: this slick, dangerous kid from the wrong side of town swooping in and knocking up their beautiful, smart daughter and probably not even planning ahead to pick out a venue for the marriage or hospital or preschool for their grandkid; and then there was the whole thing with his ma's car not starting, which he won't revisit because he still wants to die when he thinks about it) to outright disasters (Kevin's dad; the hacky sack and urn).

Daniel waved off Johnny's weird and totally unsubtle hints-slash-demands that he ride with him. That boy sure had a fixation on his car; Daniel'd almost forgotten the true extent of it. Johnny was so lucky he mostly found it cute. And look, the Avanti will always have special place in his heart, being the location of many a first and many a fine time, but Daniel had the Ford, okay. He could drive himself. He enjoyed driving.

Anyway, he got in the Ford to follow Johnny to his pool house. It was better that Daniel drove himself, because this way he could spend the extra time psyching himself up to not be weird or too talkative or fidget and accidentally engage in unintentional acts of property damage (did an urn count as property damage or like, assault? Could you assault the deceased? It seemed like an important legal question. He figures it was a good thing he was a minor when the incident occurred.)

So most parents took one look at Daniel and didn't like him, big deal! This was going to be different. He was an adult, for one, and Johnny was a guy, for two. Did that make this more like meeting Kevin's dad and less like meeting the Mills? Hard to say. Kevin's dad never looked

at him and thought: oh this scrawny punk is going around kissing my son (and he would never kiss Kevin: like, gross). But Laura Lawrence was operating under no such blissful ignorance.

What if she blamed him for Johnny's bad decisions? Like what if she thought his running away had anything to do with Daniel? Johnny put off going home so he could drive him to New Jersey, after all. What if she thought he was taking her child away from her?

Ahead, Johnny was late hitting the brakes at a red light, and Daniel narrowly averted running into him from behind. Daniel watched his blond head turn, a distinctive move that meant he was looking at Daniel in his mirrors.

Daniel made himself grin like *no big deal*, and lift a hand. Johnny shook his head at him.

Great, that was the last thing he needed to do: rear-end the Avanti. Johnny would probably dump him on the spot. Counterpoint: that would take care of the whole meeting his mother dilemma.

Okay, so this was going to be fine. Even if Laura didn't like him, it probably wouldn't change Johnny's feelings. In fact, maybe it would inspire him to ever-greater heights of passion, like a Romeo and Juliet thing? Daniel could rock a star-crossed romance. It is the east, and Johnny is the sun! He'd had that one in his back pocket for a few weeks and was waiting to whip it out, if the opportunity arose.

But he was getting ahead of himself. There was no reason he couldn't act like a cool, normal person, and impress the hell out of Johnny's mom. He was almost nineteen years old. He was about to be employed (okay, for free, whatever) at a bonsai tree store in a soon-to-be up-and-coming neighborhood.

(Suddenly he realized he sounded exactly his ma whenever she jumped ship to some random new job. Talk about devastating.)

“You got this, you got this,” he muttered to himself, and for a moment he almost felt convinced, but then he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the rearview mirror and remembered the black eye.

Johnny's mom was totally going to think he was some kind of dangerous hoodlum, oh *god*.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter brought to you by a former loudmouthed kid whose friends' parents ~mysteriously never liked...

Daniel vs Second Thoughts

They stopped about a quarter-mile out from the Weinberg residence to stow the Avanti. Daniel thought this whole thing was a little overkill, but he'd never say as much to Johnny. Did one question when people spent a fortune on fancy food for their pets or nice clothing for their kids? No. He figured if this was Johnny's version of learning how to take care of something, it should be encouraged. Nurturing should never be criticized – at least not to a guy's face. He was itching to laugh about it to someone, but that was a whole other issue, one he really didn't have the mental space to think about right now. He was stressed enough as it is.

(Except how did they even get here, anyway – practically everybody in Johnny's life knowing about them and no one in Daniel's. Wasn't *he* supposed to be the— okay, no. Really, no. Not the time.)

Johnny pocketed his car keys and slid into the passenger side of the Ford. He shifted on the seat, as if testing it. Looked around the dash.

“Well?” asked Daniel dryly. “Do the accommodations meet with your approval?”

He already had all sorts of ideas about the Ford's bench seat that were going to blow Johnny's mind, so if the other boy wasn't won over yet – just wait. But Johnny just nodded and made an accepting noise.

Then his arm started to come up.

Daniel hurriedly threw his own across the back of the seats; no way was he getting the arm treatment in his own damn car. Johnny blinked at him; Daniel smiled blandly.

“You going to drive or what?” asked Johnny after a moment.

Driving required shifting, which required he drop the arm. There was no winning, so he sighed and got it over with quick.

They pulled away from the curb, and Johnny's arm came up, as predictable and steady as the sun. He knocked his hand into the back of Daniel's head, *you're an idiot*, and he knocked his head back against his hand, *takes one to know one*.

The sight of the mansion and its perfectly maintained garden renewed the sense of growing panic that had settled somewhat with the presence of Johnny beside him. It had been like this on the road, too: the physical reality of the moody guy made it hard to remember he was from wealth.

Daniel pulled over, parked and cut the engine. He looked at the beautiful house. Then he looked at Johnny and it was like he was seeing him for the first time the second time that day. Had any boy ever looked so obviously hungover? Daniel couldn't meet his mother under these circumstances. This was crazy. She'd either blame him, or think he was the kind of low-life who fed her son's worst impulses.

“This is crazy,” he said. “I can't meet your mother under these circumstances.”

Johnny looked up from undoing his seatbelt, blinking dumbly. “What?”

“It's just not right, it's not. Not the way it should be, all – nice and stuff.”

“Nice and stuff," he repeated.

“Yeah. And it's not like she's expecting me, right? So let's just not. Let's do it some other time.”

He looked like his brain was starting to catch up, which: god, hurry up, man. Johnny shook his head. “Wait – what? No.”

“I mean it,” said Daniel, insistent. “Look at us. I've got a black eye, and you look like you spent the night reenacting Animal House. This is going to make a terrible impression.”

Johnny's eyebrows slammed down. “Don't be stupid.”

The neverending story on this guy's nerve. “I'm serious, Johnny – c'mon, get out. Out with you!" He pushed ineffectually at his shoulder. "You go sneak in or whatever, and I'll go home—”

His eyes widen. “No. You're already *here*. Let's just go inside, stop making such a big deal out of everything.”

“Look, I've given this a lot of thought,” began Daniel.

“The problem there isn't quantity,” said Johnny, turning in his seat. He was beginning to look fed up, and a bit like he was considering lunging across and getting Daniel in a headlock or something equally ridiculous, “it's quality. You're coming in. You already agreed.”

“Well, now I'm disagreeing. I'm retracting my consent. I can do that, I have rights, you know.”

“Daniel,” he gritted out, “I will throw you over my shoulder—”

He put his finger in Johnny's face. “Go ahead try it, pal. I gave you one pass already, but the Treaty of Buffalo is still in effect.”

(*No* picking Daniel up outside of sex without his permission: a hard-won concession that became necessary after it was clear Johnny was willing to press every advantage during arguments, of which there had been many on the drive across Ontario.)

Johnny bared his teeth. “Treaty ended when the trip ended.”

“No one ever said that. Show me the part where we said that.”

“That doesn't even make sense.”

This was thoroughly ridiculous, and Johnny was a ridiculous person who didn't understand the basic rules of decent society and life. Un*less* —

“What is this?” demanded Daniel, suspicious. “Don't you want your mom to like me? Is this some kind of sabotage? Like, if you don't try, it can't hurt when you fail kind of thing?”

Johnny brought a hand up to his head like Daniel's words were causing him physical pain. He looked *so* hungover. “What? What now?”

“Um, boys?”

They both twisted around to look behind the car, where an (*incredibly* hot, and boy did Daniel wish he didn't notice things like that right now) blonde woman in a neat white tennis dress was standing with a racket bag over her shoulder, looking at them with great puzzlement.

Daniel slid a look at Johnny again: his agonized squint, chapped lips and waxy skin, red eyes, lank hair. Johnny looked back at him, eyes going immediately to the bruise.

Their next words overlapped.

“Mom, it wasn't me.”

“I had nothing to do with this, Mrs. Lawrence.”

Daniel vs Don't Think About the Lap Dance

Onwards, into the pool house they went; past the pool no one ever seemed to swim in, past the lounge chair he practically gave Johnny a lap dance in yesterday (not the time to be thinking about that), and into the kitchenette, where Daniel sat at the table. Johnny mumbled something about changing clothes and promptly abandoned him. Terrible boyfriend.

“Want something to drink, Daniel?” asked Mrs. Lawrence over her shoulder. She opened the fridge. “We've got—” And he couldn't see into the fridge, but whatever it contained made her press her lips together and close the door again. She pivoted on her heel and gave him a bright smile. Her slight blush only made her prettier. “Water?”

“Water's good,” he said quickly, smiling somewhat desperately back. He rocked forward in his chair, tucked his hands under his thighs; took his hands back out and put them on top of the table; rubbed his mouth.

Mrs. Lawrence filled two glasses of water and set one in front of him. She took the seat to his left. “So! Been an exciting few days since you got back, huh?”

“Oh, what? Oh, no, not really, it's been fine.” He thought of the black eye. “Oh, this? This is nothing.” No, bad. Made it sound like it happened all the time. "That is, I mean it's not a big deal. Accident, it was an accident." Worse. Might as well have said he walked into a door.

“Okay,” she said easily. She sipped her own water and considered him.

He thought about what nice boys probably usually say in moments like this. “You have a real nice home, Mrs. Lawrence.”

Her smile went slightly quizzical. “Thank you. It *is* nice, for being a pool house. Try telling Johnny that, though.”

“Oh, I have,” he assured her, and then he felt his face go hot. And sure, there was no way she could guess about the aforementioned lap dance that had occurred the previous day, but a pool house was a weird thing to blush over, so maybe she could guess something had happened. He didn't want Johnny's mom to think he was some kind of

sex-crazed degenerate. How did he make sure she knew he wasn't some kind of sex-crazed degenerate?

“So Johnny tells me you're also into karate,” she said, after he didn't add anything more. The silence had kind of grown.

He nodded. Thought about his black eye; wished she was sitting to his right, so he could casually keep his head turned, hiding it. Said, “Yeah, I was uh, All Valley champion last year.”

“Oh, believe me,” she said, “I heard about it.”

Right, of course. God, he was such an idiot. If he wasn't careful, she'd start to think he was too stupid to date Johnny, like it wouldn't be safe to send the two of them out in the world together. Not that she probably thought Johnny was stupid; he was her son, seemed like a weird thing to think about your son. And anyway, Johnny wasn't stupid, he was just dumb. There was a difference. Right now that difference was manifesting itself through the other boy not immediately reappearing to play wing man for him during this high stakes moment.

“So you still do karate?” she prompted.

“Yeah,” he said and, fetching about for something safe, he added, “I actually, uh. Just got invited to fight in the final of this year's tournament. To defend my title.”

She slapped the table. “Hey, good for you! That's great, Daniel.”

He was startled into smiling back. “Oh. Yeah? I mean, thanks. Yeah, thanks a lot. I mean, I'm not sure if I'll do it yet, but—”

“But it's an honor just to be considered,” she finished solemnly, folding her hands over her heart, like a starlet practicing an Oscars victory speech in the mirror.

He grinned. “Exactly, you get it.” He hesitated, eyes flicking away and back. “Johnny – he doesn't think I should do it.” And neither did his sensei. Or his ma. Or – anyone, really, except the blowhard who gave him the black eye. Story of his life: worriers on one hand and bullies on the other.

“Well, it's not his decision, is it?” she said briskly. She sat back and folded her arms, fixed him with a bright, expectant look. “So. I would love to hear about your little road trip. I've been pestering Johnny

about it all month, but I'm assuming there's more to the story than running out of gas and losing hubcaps."

A trip told from the car's perspective, that sounded like Johnny. Daniel manfully suppressed a laugh and rubbed his jaw. "Jeez, he also tell you about the exciting time in Michigan he changed the Avanti's oil?"

Her eyebrows twitched upwards fractionally. "Yes."

He was less successful in stifling the laugh that time.

Johnny vs Tall Tales

He was just out of the shower and pulling on a pair of boxers when he heard a gale of laughter explode from the other room: his mom's, mostly. His head jerked up and his eyes widened.

He frantically grabbed a random pair of shorts, hopping and nearly tripping to get them up his still damp legs. He bolted for the door – reconsidered at the last second and turned around to grab a shirt – and then practically skidded out towards the kitchenette. He put the brakes on at the last second to play it cool as Daniel and Laura glanced around.

His hair was still dripping, hanging into his eyes. He shook his head to clear his vision a little and cleared his throat.

“What's so funny?” he said, tone normal as he approached the table.

“Daniel's telling me about your trip,” said Laura. And when Johnny scowled at Daniel, who gave him a baffled look back, she added, “None of that now, Johnny. He's made you out to be quite heroic.”

Daniel went pink; it was hard to say whether this was embarrassment at being caught out appreciating Johnny's awesomeness behind his back, or from the effort of swallowing a hotly-worded screed of denial. Either way, Johnny's panic packed its bags and took a vacation.

He smirked slightly and grabbed the third chair at the table. He thought about shifting the chair closer to the other boy's; didn't. “If I hadn't picked him up, he would've probably died in the desert.”

Daniel's smile didn't change, but his eyes promised murder. “I like to think we helped each other,” he said to Laura, and he was using his charming voice, the one that everyone in the universe outside of Johnny seemed to find irresistible. “He hadn't eaten anything but beef jerky in a couple days. He wasn't wearing sunscreen....”

Laura's smile wobbled a moment, and Johnny's stomach dropped. They'd talked about that time, and Johnny had swore never to do it again – run off; assume things like a coward, whatever – but the reminder was still a sore point.

Daniel glanced between the two of them in a moment almost too quick to notice, and then he said in a seemingly oblivious tone,

“Anyway, I didn't tell you about how he saved me from these three scary guys in Texas. It was all my fault – I'd been dancing, you see.” (And Laura clearly didn't see, because she wasn't insane, but confusion was better than upset any day.) “I don't know what to tell you, but sometimes when I dance, I get a little cocky. It's inconvenient, I'm working on it – but what happened was, I was standing there waiting for some, er, water. And this guy like twice my size muscles up past my dance partner without so much as a pardon.”

He continued with the story from there, and when he got to the part where Johnny intervened, he told it like he never had before. Johnny almost didn't recognize this version of themselves: Daniel the hapless fool and Johnny the cool-headed brave friend stepping in before things got out of hand.

And Laura knew Johnny, obviously, so she wasn't *quite* buying it, but she'd started to look amused again. Daniel was really laying it on thick; critically, he didn't mention the bottle Johnny took to the back of the head.

He slouched down in his chair and rubbed the back of his neck. This was probably the most romantic thing Daniel had ever done for him, and if they were alone, he knew what he'd do about it. But they weren't alone. Except – his mom already knew, right? And he wanted her to know he was okay, that everything was okay, so—

Daniel's voice didn't falter when Johnny's arm landed over his shoulders, but he did step on Johnny's foot beneath the table. Maybe he wanted more warning. Whatever. Feeling kind of stubborn about it, Johnny freed his downtrodden foot and vindictively hooked his ankle around Daniel's.

He cleared his throat slightly and kept gazing at the table like everything was cool, because it was cool. It was all totally cool.

“Anyway,” said Daniel brightly, “so we got out of Texas real quick after that.”

Johnny vs Boyfriend Johnny

His friends made jokes sometimes, liked to act like Johnny became this whole other person when he was dating someone. It was really annoying and also stupid; you don't become someone new just because your priorities change.

In a match, you choose your technique to suit your opponent. It didn't make you a different fighter, just a better one.

“Oh, honey – Daniel said he wanted his spicy,” said Laura, interrupting him as he was in the middle of ordering dinner. She was pouring herself a glass of wine.

He told the person on the phone to hang on and covered the receiver with his hand. “No, he doesn't,” he said.

She frowned. “He said he did. I remember.” She gave him a stern look. “I did not raise you to be one of those men who orders for his date. Especially if the date has already chosen.”

Oh god. “No, that's not – I mean, *right,* but,” how to explain this, “look, it's because he's stupid.” She didn't seem to think that was better, and okay. He craned his neck to make sure Daniel was still distracted in the other room and said, “Look, he sees three little peppers on a menu and he can't help himself, he thinks he's letting down like, the entire Italian-American community if he admits he can't handle it. But he *can't*, I've seen it. My way, there's no arguing and he doesn't have to drink a gallon of milk with his dinner.”

Johnny had felt pretty smart last time he was ordering food and found this workaround. Daniel got to continue happily in his delusions, and Johnny didn't have to watch as he pretended he wasn't dying across the table.

Laura looked torn between amusement and a lingering skepticism, but apparently she didn't feel that committed to a woman's right to order her own meal, or whatever the hell was going on here. Blinking through her bemusement, she patted his cheek and wandered back over to keep Daniel distracted as Johnny finished ordering the food.

Daniel ate his food and didn't look suspicious or say anything, and Johnny was so busy widening his eyes at his mom, giving her a silent *see? I know what I'm doing*, that he almost missed the part of the conversation where Daniel laid out his grand plans for the future.

“A tree nursery?” said Laura.

“Yeah – Mr. Miyagi, he's a genius with this stuff. Like, he looks at a tree and he just sees it, sees what it's meant to look like. He's been doing it for years, already basically has the stock, and I figure we just need a place. So that's what I'm doing right now,” he added, conscientiously folding his hands together atop the table. “I'm looking at real estate in the area.”

Johnny didn't roll his eyes, because Johnny was a good boyfriend. But it was a near thing, especially when his mom turned her eyes to him and said:

“A budding businessman! Well, Johnny always did seem drawn to those with a strong sense of direction.”

Daniel did his best not to preen too obviously, while Johnny clung to his resolution to look supportive no matter what. But it was hard. Daniel didn't have a strong sense of direction, he had a strong sense he was always right. The direction was irrelevant. Like, the guy had used a map for Route 66. And that was in the desert, when there was just the one road, most of the time. *Direction*....

“...are you planning to do while Daniel's hard at work in his new venture?” his mom was asking him.

He blinked across the table at her. He glanced at Daniel, who only raised his eyebrows. Also waiting for an answer: what the hell. Suddenly everyone was on his back? It was a Saturday.

Clearly he was going to be Daniel's boyfriend, but he didn't think either of them understood that this was a full-time gig.

“Security,” he said, ignoring Daniel's disbelieving look. He gave him mom a close-mouthed smile and nodded, because he liked the sound of that. “Yeah. I'll be providing security. For the tree place.”

"Uh huh," said Laura and she sipped her wine.

What his friends didn't understand about dating was kind of the same thing they hadn't understood about karate: to be good at it, like *really* good at it, you had to focus. And if you couldn't be good at it, then you shouldn't be doing it. Eventually, if you did it right, habit and muscle memory would take over and you'd be able to relax a little, but until then you couldn't accept distractions.

Or maybe they didn't need to do that, maybe his friends' brains worked differently or something. It wouldn't be the first time.

Johnny vs Goodbye, For Now

Despite spending the last half hour trying to think of a way to suggest Daniel sleep over without either the other boy or his mom reading it the wrong way, Johnny was forced to admit temporary defeat by the end of the evening.

“Daniel,” said Laura, leaning against the open sliding door, “it was a – pleasure.”

“Do you think she meant that?” asked Daniel as Johnny walked him to his car.

“Why wouldn't she?” said Johnny, nonplussed. He looked over at the yellow Ford and really regretted not thinking ahead to sneaking out earlier and stealing its spark plugs.

Such was his distraction, he was taken by surprise as Daniel punched the air with both fists like Rocky. He jumped a little before spinning to walk backwards in front of him. “Told you there was nothing to worry about,” he said smugly. In the evening gloam, his teeth were the only bright thing in his face.

“You did?” said Johnny, confused. “There's isn't?"

Daniel pointed back at the house. “She loved me! I did *amazing* in there, did you hear all that? Oh man, this is gonna be a whole new chapter in my life, I can just tell. It's all gonna be smooth sailing from here: peace and free love,” (“I don't think that means what you think it means,” said Johnny, narrowing his eyes a little, because he'd better not mean that) “and financial success. When you extend a hand in friendship, Johnny, sometimes the world reaches back and shakes it.”

“You got punched by a complete stranger *yesterday*.” But Daniel wasn't listening.

They got to the Ford and Daniel leaned back against the passenger side, still smiling into space. Johnny figured he was probably past Mars by now. He was about to step in and coax him back down, maybe with a kiss – probably with a kiss, literally nothing else would get the job done – when a flash of headlights turning across them caught his attention.

Sid was home.

The black BMW pulled up in front of the house just alongside the path to the front door; Sid had the position down to the inch because he hated walking. As Johnny watched over his shoulder, the driver side opened and Sid climbed out.

They looked at each other from across the thirty or so yards. Johnny's hands balled into fists with the effort of not looking away first, and his face went a little red. It was hard to make out Sid's expression in the dark, but his stance was enough. Some guys could make you feel small by doing nothing more than putting their hands in their pockets.

A light touch of fingers along his wrist: Daniel. “Hey,” he said softly. “Hey, Johnny.”

“Yeah,” he said, not looking away.

His fingers stroked a second before encircling, tugging. “That him? You okay? Has he been – bothering you?”

“We haven't talked. Not since,” and he didn't finish, because he figured it was pretty obvious.

Across the grounds, the man reached into his car for his briefcase and turned away. Johnny blinked and looked around at Daniel, who was watching him with big, serious eyes. What had he been doing? He couldn't remember. He felt Sid's presence like a cold wind at his back.

Daniel glanced back at the house, more observing than wary. He pushed off the car and put his arms around Johnny's waist, and oh, right. That's what he was doing.

“How long's the divorce going to take, did they say?” asked Daniel quietly. “When can you guys get out of here?”

He shook his head. Sid was fighting it every step of the way. His mom tried to keep all the calls and paperwork out of the way, but it's not like he didn't notice them, or the steady turnover of white wine in the fridge.

He cleared his throat and slid a hand along the small of Daniel's back. “Anyway, um – you're going straight back, right?”

Daniel was still watching him closely. He shook his head slightly, but not like he was saying no. “Yeah, I guess? But Johnny, are you—”

“Maybe I'll come over tomorrow? You said, you said you guys were

going to work on a new kata, right?”

He gave an almost soundless sigh and hit his chin against Johnny's shoulder, followed it up with his mouth, twisting in thought. “Yeah,” he said against his shirt.

“Okay.” He wanted to kiss him, but he didn't know if Sid was still watching from a window or something. Somehow he felt like it would be tainted if he was. So he held on, memorizing the compact solidity of Daniel in his arms until it was time for him to pull away and go home.

Johnny vs Dream Johnny

That night, sweating in the temperature-controlled room—

It played out, and in the way of dreams, it seemed to last forever. The chase: the staggering slight figure sprinting through the dark ahead of him, Daniel's mediocre cardio carrying him across the field. Not fast enough, not nearly fast enough.

Johnny could pick Daniel up, a feat of strength which made sense because he once pulled him down – off the fence, precious inches from escaping and sparing them both what came next.

He wasn't Johnny's Daniel when he punched him in the stomach, but he was Daniel, the same Daniel who would become Johnny's (no one else could be so consistently infuriating). But if he was the same Daniel back then, didn't that make Johnny the same Johnny who punched him in the stomach? Punched him in the stomach so he curled over; kicked him in the head to the ground; kicked him in the chest and then kicked him again for good measure until he was spinning against the fence. A flopping useless assemblage of skinny limbs versus Johnny's furious own.

Why was he so angry? He couldn't remember.

Johnny also couldn't remember if Daniel said anything. He didn't think he did, and what did that say, that Johnny was able to shut his Daniel up?

In the dream, he *was* Johnny's Daniel and it didn't change anything. Daniel ran and Johnny chased him down. Johnny shook him and Daniel trembled. His hands reached for Johnny's but never landed, because he was on the ground, against the fence, hunched over. Gasping in pain.

He could've done anything to him, *anything*, but Daniel still looked at him with complete trust in his eyes. His hands never stopped reaching, and Johnny's foot never stopped finding him.

—he made a high, harsh noise and rolled over. He had nothing to hold but his own pillow. Down was soft and possessed no elbows, couldn't whimper in pain or flinch away.

Johnny squeezed the pillow to his chest and wished it was Daniel; wished he could bury his face in his hair and hide from the world; wished he could curl around Daniel and somehow hide the other boy from himself.

Johnny vs Karate Voyeurism

“What do you mean, you're just going to watch?” said Daniel, and Johnny flushed because when *he* said it, it sounded weird.

The morning had been terrible so far: they were out of orange juice at home; bad traffic had followed him from Encino; the tree was still hanging over the dojo's back garden waiting for anyone to climb it and also, he was pretty sure Daniel's sensei didn't like him.

It didn't help matters that Daniel apparently hadn't mentioned he was coming over, so he just showed up at the man's door like some kind of hanger-on, a too-big lout who couldn't even stop Daniel from collecting another black eye. Johnny was in the middle of thinking about getting comprehensively beaten by his sensei the year before on Halloween, and how that had hurt a lot but he was really glad the man could do it, when Mr. Miyagi opened his door and looked out at him on the step.

Johnny didn't say anything. And Mr. Miyagi didn't say anything, so then they were just two guys standing at a door, not saying anything.

By the time Daniel rescued them, Johnny had decided there was absolutely no way in hell he could dare train with them. He hadn't actually been invited, and the sheer disrespect of the idea made him cringe. Especially once Mr. Miyagi mentioned it was a family kata. So that led to Johnny nudging a rock in the back garden and muttering some excuse, which led to *Daniel* demanding:

“What do you mean, you're just going to watch?” He put his hands on his hips and stared at Johnny, confused. “What can you learn by watching, you have to go through the moves, you know that.”

He really wished they were having this conversation out of earshot of his sensei, who stood back and watched them impassively.

Johnny's face went hot, but he stuck to his guns. As ever, they weren't very good guns, but they were all he had.

“It's fine, I don't have to – look, I just came to hang out.” God, that made him sound so unemployed. He glanced quickly at Mr. Miyagi and added, “And make sure you don't get into trouble.” And that made it sound like he doubted Mr. Miyagi's ability to protect his student. “I'm fine,” he added.

“You're a headcase,” corrected Daniel, but he shook his head and turned back to his sensei.

So Johnny settled back against the fence with his elbows on his knees and picked idly at blades of grass while sort of squinting at the kata as it unfolded in front of him. After a few minutes he forgot to feel awkward because he couldn't help but look and study it, and think about the differences between what he saw and what he'd been taught: the short, efficient motion of Miyagi's karate that looked so much less convincing than the sweeping, long movements of Cobra Kai, but which he knew from personal experience could be effective. Was one better than the other, or was there a difference in utility and setting? The type of fight?

And maybe he zoned out for a while there thinking about it, analyzing and considering scenarios, because it took a couple blinks before he realized the three of them were no longer alone in the garden – the garden gate was apparently unlocked and someone had gotten in: a tall man, unfamiliar to Johnny.

Neither Daniel nor his sensei noticed him, so Johnny hurriedly shoved up to his feet and moved to intercept.

Johnny vs Intruder?

Johnny took a few steps and leaped onto the deck, putting himself neatly in front of the man just as he was calling out:

“Excuse me—” He glanced down at Johnny and gave a small acknowledging smile, like he didn't realize this was a confrontation. “Mr. Miyagi?” And then he tried to step past Johnny.

He stepped quickly to the right, heading the man off and forcing him to either take a step backwards or bump chests. The man chose the former option, though his face creased in bafflement. Johnny stared narrowly back.

He was tall, *really* tall. Had to have at least five inches on Johnny, and Johnny wasn't short. Johnny didn't like this: what was a tall guy like this doing here? Didn't he see the short people over on the lawn? He didn't belong here.

“Johnny,” hissed Daniel somewhere behind him, “what are you doing?”

“Are you Mr. Miyagi?” asked the man, looking past his shoulder – which he could do, because he was so fucking tall, what the hell.

“Hai,” said Daniel's sensei, which Johnny supposed meant he had to let this continue.

The man slid him a wary look as he once more stepped past him. “My name is Terry Silver. My master is Kim San Jang of South Korea,” which meant he knew karate, so Johnny followed him closely as he crossed the deck boards, getting closer and closer to Daniel. The man's head twitched like he wanted to look behind him, but he didn't glance at Johnny again.

“My teacher sends his respects,” said this guy, and he bowed. Over his inclined back, Daniel sent Johnny a silent but ardent *what the fuck are you doing?*

Which Johnny ignored in favor of moving so he was alongside the man. He studied what he could see of his arms sticking out of his pushed-up sleeves. Strong: big hands. Freak legs. Clearly trouble.

Silver straightened up, hands twitching at his sides. He looked like he

was thinking about stepping closer, but Johnny shifted again and he stayed in place. He looked at Mr. Miyagi and said:

“John Kreese of the Cobra Kai dojo was our school's number one student.” Wait, what? “Word reached us in Korea only two months ago about what happened last year at the tournament.”

“They were talking about the All Valley in *Korea*?” demanded Johnny. He wasn't sure he could even find Korea on a map, and now there was a whole country that knew he lost the All Valley? What?

The man glanced at him again with a flicker of annoyance before continuing, “My teacher sends his apologies for John Kreese's dishonorable actions.”

Johnny felt himself go a little pale. A whole country knew about his dishonorable actions. A whole country he couldn't even find on a map. He was pretty sure it was near China, which was the big bulging bit on the right side of Asia?

He finally looked away as Silver bowed again and Mr. Miyagi accepted the apology. Had Johnny apologized to Mr. Miyagi? No, he hadn't. He'd just shown up and started lounging around the place like he owned it. Fuck.

“I was sent here to help John regain balance,” said Silver, and this whole thing was starting to mess bad with his head. He hadn't thought about his sensei in a couple months. It was easier not to, easier to pretend the whole thing hadn't even happened. Why was everything and everyone in the world suddenly determined to make him remember what happened?

“Hope you can be successful,” said Mr. Miyagi with a small, polite smile.

“Unfortunately, I arrived too late,” said Silver, and yeah, no kidding. It would take a natural disaster or an alien attack to make Sensei change or *regain balance* or whatever. “I buried John last week.”

Johnny felt more than saw Daniel look to him, but he could only stare at Silver – in shock, now, rather than suspicion.

“...What?” he said.

Johnny vs Death

He's dead? Johnny heard as if from far away or maybe through three feet of water. *What happened?*

His doctor said it was cardiac arrest, but I knew John better than anyone.

Karate was his life.

And after he lost all his students—it just broke his heart.

Johnny took a step back, and another, and he sort of forgot about the deck and took a step backwards right off the side. He went down hard, all the air in his chest pushing out in a rush, and found himself staring up at the sky.

Daniel landed beside him on the grass in a rush, eyes wide with concern. One hand went to his chest while the other reached automatically to cradle his face. “Jesus, Johnny.”

“I'm fine,” he said, and okay, it kind of came out like a groan. But that was just the incline of his chest or something, the lack of air. Biology.

Daniel ignored him in favor of feeling around the back of his head. “How about you put as much attention to watching where you're going as you do watching other people, huh?”

Johnny batted his hand away and started to sit up. The only reason he didn't stop Daniel from helping was because he sort of wanted his arms around him. Once semi-vertical, he hunched over his legs and stared at the grass. Broke his heart? What did that even mean. (Dead, is what it meant.)

“Is he okay?” asked Silver.

“I'm fine,” said Johnny again, embarrassment beginning to creep into the shock, giving a hard edge to his reply.

“Please excuse him, Mr. Silver,” said Daniel. His hand rubbed the middle of his back a little, and it was stupid how good it felt, even with other people watching. “It's only, he was—”

Johnny dug his elbow into Daniel's side and the other boy looked at him, confused. Johnny widened his eyes a little and shook his head. He didn't want to get into it, not with some guy from Korea who thought he had to apologize for him without even knowing who he was.

“He knew your friend,” finished Daniel, not looking away from Johnny.

“Oh,” said Silver, tone going a little stiff. “Well, I'm sorry to have to tell you the bad news. John was a hero.”

Johnny screwed his face up and blinked up at the guy. Okay? Whatever you have to tell yourself, man.

Silver glanced between the three of them, gaze eventually finding Mr. Miyagi and staying there. “He wasn't always like what you saw," he insisted. "He saved my life in Vietnam. War does something to a man.”

Oh, christ, he was one of those. Johnny didn't want to listen to this. He must've spent a few thousand hours in the dojo over the years, listening to *In Vietnam*....

(Broke his heart? What the fuck did that *mean*.)

His hands went to the grass and he pushed himself up to standing. Daniel's hands hovered, steadying; Silver and Mr. Miyagi glancing sidelong at them the whole time. Johnny flushed. Daniel didn't care.

“I'm just,” said Johnny, nodding to the garden gate, “I just need,” some air? He was already outside. Screw it, he didn't have to explain himself. Head down, he headed quickly for the gate. He could hear Daniel dogging his steps.

He barely made it out of the garden before Daniel launched himself at his back, arms coming up to squeeze him tight. Johnny stumbled forward a half-step and stared at the ground and let it happen.

“I'm sorry,” said Daniel against his spine. “I'm real sorry.”

“Broke his heart, what does that even mean?” said Johnny thickly. “Did he kill himself or something?” Did he kill himself because of Johnny and the others?

“Maybe the doctor was right, maybe it was cardiac arrest.”

“He was in his *thirties*.”

“Well, maybe it was a congenital issue.”

It was such a stupid thing to say, Johnny had to twist around and hug him back. This quickly turned into kissing him, because he wanted to feel something, anything else. Anything other than the guilt growing up in his gut like a weed.

He claimed Daniel's mouth, licking deep, and stumbled them back against the fence.

Daniel took it all: his frantic movements, the tight hold and hard kiss. His hands came up to Johnny's shoulders, clinging rather than gentling, and Johnny wanted desperately to be gentle but couldn't seem to remember how. For a free-falling moment, he wanted to hide inside the other boy and never come out.

Just as Daniel made a desperate, keening sound that seemed like it would echo forever around the inside of Johnny's head, the garden gate opened again and that Silver guy was saying:

“Oh, excuse me.”

Johnny vs John

Johnny stepped swiftly back and then immediately regretted it, because he didn't know which was worse – being seen pressing another boy up against a fence, or leaving Daniel exposed and open to viewing. A quick glance showed him looking – well, looking like a boy who'd just been kissed to hell and back, all flushed cheeks and swollen mouth. Jesus.

Daniel stared at Johnny with eyes that were still blown wide, nothing but pupil, and then he abruptly cleared his throat and leaned back against the fence, kicking his foot up against the boards. His mouth opened as if to offer a nonchalant quip (Johnny braced himself), but in the end it only wavered a moment before shutting again with a faint grimace. Thank god.

Johnny stared hard at the sidewalk and decided to say nothing as well. It was an easy decision because he had nothing to say.

Something that might have been a laugh came from the Silver guy's chest, but he quickly stifled it; when they both dared to look over at him, he smiled slightly.

“Don't worry, boys,” he said easily, lifting his hands from his sides. “Really. None of my business.” He hesitated, eyes flicking between them before landing on Johnny, to whom he said, “You must've been upset. I'm very sorry about dumping the news on you like that. I didn't realize anyone who knew him that well would be here today. Were you close?”

He's known Sensei since he was twelve. Kreese was the first person who taught him how to stand up for himself, who gave him the confidence to speak up to Sid. He took a disordered, confusing world and made it clear; Johnny only ever had to walk where the man led. Under him, he went from being an awkward misfit to something strong, a weapon. But weapons were meant to be used by someone else. They didn't think for themselves. They couldn't betray or feel betrayed.

Johnny put his hands in his pockets and shrugged stiffly. Define close.

Silver's mouth pressed tight for a moment, and he nodded. “Hey, I get it. It can be tough, talking about this kind of thing. Well, sorry again. And – you, you're the champion, right?” he said to Daniel, who

stopped looking at Johnny sympathetically and straightened up from the fence, startled.

Oh god, don't call him that, Johnny would've muttered, if Johnny was speaking. Instead, he scowled at the sidewalk.

“Yeah, I. I'm Daniel,” he said.

“I wanted to pass on my apologies to you personally as well,” said Silver, and then he bowed to him. Sorry you fought some dishonorable dicks last year, went the unspoken comment. Johnny gritted his teeth, swallowed hard.

Daniel glanced at Johnny and bowed a little awkwardly back and what was that supposed to be? That's alright, I'm dating one of those dishonorable dicks?

Everything was terrible.

“Sorry about your friend,” said Daniel and the thing was, he actually meant it. Goddamn Daniel.

Silver smiled solemnly at him and nodded. He turned to go and that was apparently that: someone saw them together and the world didn't end, no one screamed. Daniel turned back to him and made a relieved face.

“Should I bow to you too?” asked Johnny, folding his arms.

His lips pursed in a caught smirk. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

He shook his head and then paused, thinking: his gut churning. He couldn't leave it there. He couldn't.

“Be right back,” he muttered to Daniel, and then broke into a jog to catch up with Silver. He called ahead, and the man turned back just as he was reaching his – *what the fuck was that*?

“Is that. A Ford – what, Courier?” asked Johnny, stopping a few feet away and craning his neck to look over the truck. It was a pale blue, paint job bleached from the sun with no attempt at upkeep, and who could blame him, really.

Silver blinked down at the crime against automotive engineering. “Yes, a '72,” he said, and he said it with an almost admirable lack of

shame. Maybe it came with the height. Tower over everyone, and you could have shitty taste in vehicles.

“Never seen a convertible before,” said Johnny, aiming somewhat desperately for, if not enthusiasm or respect, at least neutrality. “Gotta be ah, custom job, right? Huh. Interesting.”

Silver nodded pleasantly. He waited a couple seconds and then said, “Did you want something?”

Right. Johnny stopped looking at the ancient mutant truck. He shifted on the pavement and said, “Where'd you bury him?” And when Silver only continued to look at him silently, he added, “I know a bunch of his former students, we – they'll want to like, pay our respects. So, could you tell me? Where. Where he is?”

“He was actually cremated,” the man said after a moment. “Sorry – figure of speech, earlier. When you're breaking the news, it's easier just to say, well. But yes, I had him cremated. It was what he had stipulated in his will.”

“Oh,” said Johnny, stomach sinking. He thought about asking where he spread the ashes, but suddenly that seemed too invasive. "Okay, sorry. I'll – let you go. Sorry.”

“There's nothing to be sorry about,” said Silver. He put a hand on the door of his truck and paused. He looked back at the dojo and then at Johnny, retreating down the road. “Hey, I didn't catch your name earlier. You were a student of John's?”

He squinted up at the sky; down the empty street; at the hideous truck.

“Yeah, I was his student once,” he said, like it was a lifetime ago. He wished it was a lifetime ago, maybe this would be easier. “My name's John too.”

Johnny vs The Worrier

Johnny had to go get the other guys and break the news, but that meant leaving Daniel. Daniel, who was acting really weird, walking quickly at his side and reaching out every few steps to touch his elbow or arm like he thought Johnny was going to trip or something, like he was an old lady who needed help crossing the street. Daniel was probably the type of kid who helped old ladies cross streets. Johnny just didn't know why he suddenly thought he was one.

They reached the Avanti, and he leaned up against it, rubbing his face. He blinked bemusedly as Daniel stepped in close and reached up to brush his hair back from his eyes.

“Are you gonna be okay?” he asked, and then, without waiting for an answer (yeah, of course he was): “You've never really talked about him but then, you're you, right, so I know that doesn't mean much. I mean, you knew him since you were a kid, right? Shit, Johnny, do you want me to come with you? No, I shouldn't. Not my place, I know that. Sorry, I don't mean to sound like I'm making it about me, I'm just – are you sure you're okay?”

“Yeah,” said Johnny.

Daniel's shoulders slumped and he gave Johnny a look of utter dejection. He pressed his hands against Johnny's cheeks like he might collapse his head, looked up at him with big, sad eyes and said, “I'm a perceptive guy, but you make it really tough sometimes. I have no idea what you're thinking.”

“I'm thinking,” said Johnny through slightly squashed lips, “you're being really weird.” He tugged his head free and wrapped an arm around Daniel's waist to palm the small of his back. “Look, you're going to stick around here today, right? Not going to – go off and get jumped for the hell of it?”

“I'll be here, whenever you need me,” said Daniel immediately, which wasn't exactly what he asked but answered the question anyway, so that was good.

“Right.” He cleared his throat and tweaked one of the flyway ends of Daniel's karate headband. “Right, so – I should go.” He paused. “You gonna let me go?”

Because Daniel's arms were still around his neck. This was a problem, because it wasn't like Johnny was equipped to remove them himself. He was kinda stuck there until the other boy decided to tear himself away. They could be here all day, he thought. And it didn't sound so bad, except he had to go tell his friends their sensei was dead.

Daniel's expression creased, and he actually shuffled closer. No, thought Johnny. Wrong direction. But he didn't move either.

“I know I have to, but my gut says I shouldn't,” said Daniel.

“You shouldn't trust your gut.”

His eyebrows arched. “Am I still talking to Johnny Lawrence?”

“My gut, you can trust,” he clarified. “But yours – no. You have terrible instincts.”

This earned him a sarcastic smile and a disbelieving shake of the head. “Yeah, yeah.”

Johnny jostled him closer and kissed him. “Yeah, yeah,” he agreed against his lips, and then Daniel's arms were tightening around his neck, and Johnny got to put off the worst of the day for a little longer.

Johnny vs Coordinating Goddamn Schedules

“You're back early,” said Laura, looking up from the kitchenette table as he came in through the sliding door. “I thought you were spending the day playing bodyguard.”

He would never have told her about his plan, but it was hard to avoid the topic when your boyfriend shows up with a black eye. The previous night, he'd come back inside from seeing Daniel off only to have her waiting for him with folded arms and *spill* in her expression. So he had.

“But I don't get it,” she'd said. “Daniel seems a little – strange, sure, but harmless. Why single him out?”

At which point he should've admitted about the bullying last year, and how it started this whole thing in the first place. But he didn't, because he was a coward and didn't want his mom to look at him with disappointment.

That afternoon, he stood just inside the doorway of the pool house and said, “Sensei Kreese is dead,” and then went to grab the phone and stretch its cord to the limit carrying it into his room, before she could do something unbearable like hug him.

Bobby wanted details, but Johnny didn't have any.

“You didn't ask?” he said in disbelief.

“He said it was his heart.”

“What does that *mean*?”

And he could get away, but only *after eight*.

Tommy sounded stiff even before Johnny broke the news, and then he sounded angry.

He didn't want to come out at first, but after Johnny wheedled and

cajoled and generally cussed him out, he said he'd come, but that he had to be back *by ten*, because he had early training the next morning. Mentioning it felt a little disrespectful, but whatever.

Jim sounded like he was going to cry, so neither of them wanted to stay on the phone long. He was available *whenever*.

Dutch was silent for a long moment, and then he said, “Bet he killed himself.”

“What makes you say that?” demanded Johnny, hand tightening on the receiver.

“Do you remember how many pushups that guy could do? And he ran like, half-marathons and shit. No way does a guy like that have a heart attack in his thirties.”

He shifted on his feet, cast his eyes up to the ceiling. “Maybe it was a cogenital thing.”

“What the fuck do his genitals have to do with it?”

Dutch could come, eight was fine, but he might be late because he was *always late*.

When he was finished, he hung up the phone and opened the door to his bedroom, and stepped into his mom's waiting arms.

Johnny vs Certain Big Mouths

They met at their old hangout spot at the beach, where the dunes rose and fell, providing cover for whatever they needed cover for. Used to be, it was fighting and drinking. Today it was a wake. Johnny wasn't ruling out fighting and drinking though; Tommy was acting weird.

“I didn't see anything in the obituaries,” said Bobby, who was dealing with the situation as he usually did: by retreating into his *just the facts, ma'am* attitude. He leaned against his bike with his arms crossed, face creased in thought. “I went back a couple weeks, and I didn't see *anything*.”

“How did you even check that? You have a stack of newspapers lying around your room?” asked Johnny.

His brow pinched. “I went to the library.”

“Oh.” He shrugged. “Well, maybe he didn't die around here. Maybe no one – wrote to the papers. Like, do you have to, is there a law or something?”

Bobby shook his head and shrugged back, but he continued to look dissatisfied.

“What if he killed himself?” said Jim. He sounded so miserable, Johnny reached into the cooler and grabbed a beer to press into his hands. If a man was going to cry, he should at least have the cover of alcohol.

“Sensei would never kill himself. It's too pussy a move,” said Tommy.

Johnny also grabbed a beer for himself. Something to occupy his hands as he said, “The guy made it sound like he was real torn up about losing the dojo.”

None of them said anything for a few moments.

Bobby kicked the sand and stood up from his bike. “What was his name again? This army buddy?”

“Uh.” Jesus, it had only been a few hours ago, what was it? “I don't know, it was – Silver. Something Silver. Said he just got back from Korea.”

“I thought Sensei fought in Vietnam?” said Jim, confused.

“What does that have to do with anything?” asked Johnny, also confused.

They both raised their beers and drank.

Johnny eyed Bobby's stubborn expression. “Look, what's your deal? Do you not believe the guy? Why would someone lie about that?”

“Yeah,” said Tommy. “Why would someone lie?”

And Johnny couldn't ignore his tone or the general attitude he'd been throwing out since arriving. He lowered his beer and turned to him. “And what's with *you*?”

Tommy shifted. Didn't look at him. “Nothing.” His jaw worked; Johnny waited him out. Tommy scratched the side of his nose, eyes running over the top of the dune. His mouth pressed tight and—

“Surprised you didn't invite Daniel LaRusso down here. I mean, you were with him this morning, right? He found out before the rest of us about all this. Right?”

Johnny said nothing.

Bobby said, “God*damnit*, Jimmy.”

And Jim said, “I'm sorry, it just slipped out! I didn't mean to, I swear.”

“This is why no one tells you things.”

He finally recognized the look on Tommy's face: it was discomfort. And anger.

Mainly, it was disgust.

Bobby was speaking, trying his usual peacekeeping crap. Tommy wasn't having it, and Jim was looking more uncomfortable and uncertain by the second, eyes going between the three of them like someone watching people pay table tennis with a grenade.

“No, Bobby,” said Tommy loudly. “Your kumbaya bullshit won't cut it here. He was supposed to be the champion, and now he's going around sucking cock? No wonder Sensei killed himself. I kinda want to kill myself just thinking about it.”

“Yeah, well. No one's stopping you, man,” said Johnny.

Tommy took a step forward and Johnny threw his beer down, ready to meet him halfway, but they were interrupted by the arrival of Dutch, roaring down the side of the dune and circling them in a rough, skidding stop that threw sand up all over everything. Tommy turned his head and spit; Johnny cursed and dug sand out of his eyes.

The engine cut and he took of his helmet, already shouting, “We drinking to the dead bitch, or what?”

Johnny vs The Mike Walker Thing

“Well, I can't be too late, Jimmy's not even crying yet,” said Dutch. He walked over and nudged the cooler open with his foot. Bent and grabbed a beer.

“I'm not gonna cry,” he insisted, turning in place. “And it's *Jim* now, I told you.”

Dutch cracked his can open and took a long swig. He eyed the other boy and shook his head. “You just don't look like a Jim, man. Maybe you should give up and go by James.”

His mouth thinned. “I don't want to go by James. James is the name of a twelve-year-old having a panic attack outside his piano recital.”

And if Johnny thought that sounded too specific to not be based on reality, he was pretty sure he wasn't the only one. Bobby cleared his expression of all judgment; Tommy scratched his head, mouth twisted skeptically.

“Yeah, yeah. Fine, James sounds kinda faggy anyway. I'll give you that.” He lifted a finger from his can and stabbed it in Jim's direction. “But I ain't calling you Jim. Pick something else.”

Jim looked resigned about being messed with, which should've been a welcome distraction, but now Tommy was looking from Johnny to Dutch, expression shifting to mutinous. Which meant – fuck it. Johnny knew what it meant. He couldn't believe this was happening now. Unbelievable.

He bit back a curse and rubbed his neck. “Uh, Dutch, can I – I need to talk to you about something.”

Dutch looked away from Jim, still smirking. He gestured with his beer. “What?”

Johnny didn't look at Tommy. He jerked his head. “Just – come over here a moment, okay.”

“Could you just be cool?” said Bobby behind them; talking to Tommy, probably.

Johnny picked up his pace, put some distance between them and the group. Dutch followed him. He didn't know how far he should walk; if

this ended in a fight, did he want Bobby close enough to try to stop it? He knew what Bobby would say to that question, but he didn't necessarily want to be dragging the other boy into his problems over and over again. Especially not about this. It's not like it was going away anytime soon, and what was Bobby going to do, play referee for the rest of their lives?

“What the fuck is going on?” said Dutch behind him. “What crawled up Tommy's ass? I mean, I know Kreese is dead. RIP and all that shit. But he was more gung ho about leaving Cobra Kai than anyone.”

“Maybe not more than Bobby,” said Johnny, turning around. He glanced over his shoulder, but the others were out of sight now, below behind the dune. He cleared his throat.

Dutch looked at him expectantly and drank.

Right.

He should just do this quick. If he did it quick, then Dutch could throw a punch or whatever, and he and Tommy could go off and pay their respects alone together while bitching about what a fairy Johnny was, and then this fucking day could be at least be over.

He rubbed his hands on his jeans. “Okay, uh. Hey, so, you remember – you remember um, Mike Walker? Freshman year, the whole Mike Walker thing?”

Dutch sucked his front teeth and stared at him, eyes going wide and mad, that unsettling way he could always flip from normal to fury like flicking a switch. He crumpled his can in his hand and let it drop to the ground.

Then he jumped and tried to put Johnny in a headlock.

They staggered sideways, struggling over the sand; Johnny trying to pry the other boy's iron arms from around his neck, Dutch huffing over his head like a some kind of locomotive.

“How'd you hear about that,” demanded Dutch, twisting him.

“Fuckin' everyone knows about it?” gritted out Johnny. He brought his elbow back hard, driving it into Dutch's gut. The arms around his neck disappeared and they both fell to the sand, wheezing.

“What d'you mean, everyone knows. How. How could that be?”

Johnny shook his head slowly. “Dude got sent to military school. Everyone knows that.” He stared at him, confused. “Wait. Wait, what?”

Dutch narrowed his eyes. “Why you suddenly bringing it up now?”

“Dutch, wait. Did – were you?” He thought he might pass out. He had to be wrong about this. The world could not be this weird. Like – no. What were the odds. No way. Not *Dutch*.

Dutch shoved back up to his feet and brushed the sand from his jeans in swift, jerky movements. “It's not what you think. It's not like I was doing anything, really. It wasn't a big deal or anything. But yeah, I mean. Yeah. He was blowing me, and his mom walked in, flipped the fuck out. Three days later, no more Mikey.”

Johnny should probably close his mouth at some point. Dutch put his hands on his hips, squared off over him all aggressive. He was in the perfect position to knee Johnny in the chin, so he knew he should back up, get up. But he could only stare.

Dutch tipped his head back and glared at the sky. “Why the fuck are we talking about this now?”

“I'm sort of. Dating Daniel LaRusso,” said Johnny, almost toneless.

That brought Dutch's gaze back down to earth. He raised his eyebrows and considered Johnny for a long moment.

“Huh,” he said.

“I can't believe you were getting blow jobs *freshman year*,” Johnny said, ten minutes later, when they were sitting on the sand, facing the ocean. It was taking him a while to adjust to the new normal, but this particular detail was a sticking point; the only thing Johnny got freshman year was spots on his forehead. Like, what the hell.

“What can I say?” Dutch smirked and grabbed his crotch. “These stones dropped early, motherfucker.”

“Urgh.” He looked away towards the tide, face twisting.

“Never would've pegged you as a fag, though,” continued Dutch, and

Johnny has never even tried to imagine what it would be like having a friend to talk to about this kind of thing, but now that it was happening, it was pretty underwhelming. “I mean, I guess it goes to show, you just never know. Right? And I can't say I think much about your taste, man. Now, me? I go for the pretty, sweet things.”

What the fuck?

“Daniel's pretty.” Johnny turned and narrowed his eyes at him. “Daniel's *sweet* – you saying he's not sweet?”

The conversation was rapidly becoming really, really gay. Like, too gay. That it was happening with Dutch was making his head spin, like he wasn't getting enough oxygen to his brain or something.

Dutch gave him a funny look. “We talking about the same guy? That twerp from last year? Short,” (*“you're literally the same height, man”*), “bad temper, talks to himself sometimes? That guy, right?”

“Watch it,” he said sharply and Dutch stared for a second before barking out a hyena laugh.

“Oh, *fuck*,” he said through the laughter. “Oh, Christ. I can't take it. Too fucking funny. Boyfriend Johnny back again. But this time getting all protective over Daniel fucking LaRusso? Priceless, man.”

Johnny put his head in his hands.

“...Tommy didn't take the news too well.”

Dutch snorted. “Can you blame him? Serious case of hero worship for like four years, and then the guy turns out to be queer? He's probably panicking right now," and then he screwed up his face and made his voice go high and mocking, "*am I gay too? What if it rubbed off on me*? Pansy.”

Johnny squinted. “That doesn't. Make me feel better?”

Dutch shook his head, brow low. “I wasn't trying to make you feel better.”

“Oh.”

He elbowed Johnny hard in the ribs. “Let's get back before they finish

off all the beer.” And he stood and started across the sand towards the dune.

Johnny stayed put and blinked a few more times at the ocean, the spreading pink and orange of the setting sun. He was suddenly really tired, and he didn't particularly want to get up or talk anymore to anyone. He sort of just wanted to get in his car and drive around for a while until everything started making sense again.

“Johnny?”

He glanced over his shoulder. “Yeah. Yeah, coming.”

Johnny vs Bobby's Respects

None of them really knew what they were doing, or what they were supposed to do when your ex-sensei maybe-killed himself because you all left his dojo. Jim suggested a bonfire and Dutch suggested more drinking, and between those two things, they wasted a lot of time.

“Okay,” said Johnny, because someone had to take charge here. He looked around at everyone's faces, lit up with the flickering driftwood fire, the night rapidly darkening at their backs. “So we should – like, go around. Pay our respects.” And when no one objected, he nodded firmly and said, “Bobby, you start.”

“No,” said Bobby.

“*Goddamnit.*”

“What do you want from me, Johnny?” he asked, a thread of anger beneath his calm. “Am I supposed to stand here and lie, pretend he was a good guy?”

“Of course not, but—”

“I could've crippled Daniel last December. For life. He could be walking around with a cane right now, and for what? So the front of the Cobra Kai dojo could have another stupid trophy? And it would've been all on me.”

Johnny stared into the fire and said nothing. The others watched them silently.

Bobby looked around at them all, eyes dark in the firelight. “You know how it was with him. He always talked like we were a team, but he was always setting us against each other. And Johnny, maybe you didn't notice so much because you were the best, but. I didn't like it.” He nudged a piece of driftwood and looked down. “I never did. I came here for you guys, and I'll even say a prayer for the man. But he tried to kill you, man. So don't ask me to pay any damn respects.”

Johnny vs What It's About

There was a short silence, broken first by Dutch snorting a little. He shook his head and turned half away from the fire. In the flickering light, his expression looked bitter.

“Wet blanket opening from Bobby, what a shocker,” he said. He stuck a cigarette in between his teeth, and started digging in his pocket for a lighter.

“Wet blanket? It's a *funeral*,” said Tommy.

“Hey, can I have one of those?” asked Jim.

“I think that's a shitty attitude,” Johnny said to Bobby, as cigarettes were handed out. He and Bobby passed; the other three lit up.

“You think *I* have the shitty attitude?” Bobby tipped his chin. “This should be good.”

Johnny couldn't tell if the heat on his face was from the fire or an angry flush. “You don't hold funerals and all that shit for the dead, they're for the living.”

“One, this isn't a funeral, it's a beer fire on the beach. Two, exactly: if this is for us, then I don't see why we can't be honest about Kreese.”

“You steal that lighter and I'll beat your ass,” hissed Dutch.

“Because it's not *about* Kreese,” said Johnny.

“So what's it about?”

And Johnny didn't know. This is why he really hated it when he and Bobby disagreed about something, because usually the other boy was the one who could explain things. Without that, Johnny was stuck with a sense in his stomach like a closed fist that said he was right, and no way to make others understand why.

Daniel had seemed to understand, he thought suddenly. He hadn't noticed it at the time, but he didn't even need to say a word. Daniel just got it.

The others were still watching him. Bobby and Tommy skeptical; Dutch narrow-eyed and waiting; Jim like he was trying not to cough.

He tried. “It's about – something ended. I mean, it had before. Already. But now, now for real. For good." He looked around at them. "I mean – guys, we put years into that place. We worked our asses off for it, and now we know even if we wanted, there is no going back. Not ever. And I know it ended badly, but I just thought—”

And he didn't know what he thought. He didn't know what he was saying. He didn't have the words, he never did. It was only, it seemed like they had so little control over things in life, and acknowledging something happened felt better than doing nothing at all.

Johnny raised his beer and drank.

Johnny vs Tommy's Questions

“What I wanna know,” said Tommy, a while later, “what I wanna know is why we're all standing here like everything's fine—”

“Nothing's fine,” muttered Johnny.

“Everything is fine,” said Bobby at the same time.

“We're just standing around like it's *normal*,” he said, more loudly, and he pointed across the fire at Johnny, “ignoring the big pink fucking elephant on the beach.”

“Pink elephants,” said Jim. “Like in Dumbo?”

“Oh, Jesus Christ, Jimmy – enough with your fuckin—”

“Hey,” said Johnny sharply, “leave him alone.”

Dutch finished his latest beer, crushed the can, and dropped it before turning to Tommy; chest brushing his, no mistake what he was angling for. “Better question is why you are gagging to talk about it so bad. Something you want to share with the class, Tommy?”

His face screwed up in confusion, followed immediately by realization and denial. “What? No. Don't be sick.” And when Dutch made a low, considering noise and stepped in close: “Hey, I mean it. Stop messing around, I'm not in the mood, man—”

“You jealous, hm? Maybe? Jealous of some punk getting the good from Johnny?”

“Can we not?” said Johnny, wanting to die. “I mean. Like.”

“Makes me want to throw up,” said Tommy hotly, and then he broke and shoved Dutch, which was what the other boy had been aiming for all along, and then they were on the ground, wrestling in the sand.

Johnny didn't understand why he already had a headache. The beer was really letting him down that night.

“You gonna stop that?” he asked Bobby.

“Nope,” said Bobby.

Johnny vs Jim's Memories

“Remember when I had that cast on my arm, second semester sophomore year?” asked Jim. “And he wouldn't even let me in the dojo if I wasn't going to suit up? Two and a half months, sitting around home by myself. Do you. You guys remember that?”

“Yeah,” said Bobby. “I remember that.”

And the thing was, Johnny barely did.

Johnny vs Something Ended, Anyway

Dutch leaned forward and spit blood; his tongued pushed at the skin around his mouth as he checked his teeth. He wrinkled his nose and grimaced, but it didn't look broken.

“That was a good right cross, man,” he said. “You been working on that?”

Tommy was holding his ribs. His glare barely lessened as he said, grudging. “Yeah.” He glanced around at the group and his expression tightened. “Look, I gotta go. I got training first thing tomorrow.”

“Seriously?” said Johnny. “That's it?”

Tommy finally met his eyes, and he looked angry again. “Look, you said it yourself, didn't you. It's over. We all have our own thing going on now, so – just, forget about it.”

Bobby stirred. “Wait, hang on, Tommy....”

But he turned away without pausing; said over his shoulder, “See you guys whenever.”

“This,” said Dutch, spitting again, “is not the party I expected."

Jim shifted on his feet and said quietly, “I kinda gotta get going too.”

So something ended, anyway. Just not what Johnny expected.

Johnny vs Scattering

“Listen,” said Bobby before he left, “are you okay? I know this didn't go like you planned. I think we're all just – surprised. Don't know what to think, or how to feel.”

And what was Johnny supposed to say? He felt guilty about not feeling more guilty about Sensei. He was confused. He was worried; there was apparently a lot of the past several years he didn't remember right or understand at all, and what did that mean about what he thought he understood about the present?

He wanted to ask Bobby about last Halloween, if he thought Johnny went too far any other time. He wanted to know if Tommy was ever going to speak to him again. He wanted to mention Daniel's black eye to someone.

But it was like Tommy said: they all had their own things now.

“I'm fine,” he said.

Because what kind of man doesn't handle his own shit?

Johnny vs Old Habits

Maybe he meant to drive home or maybe he meant to drive out to Mr. Miyagi's dojo or maybe he meant only to take the detour because of the nighttime construction happening on the 405, but the thing was, there was gas in the tank.

It just sort of happened.

He cut his way along the two-lane through the black hills of Topanga State Park, and it was a nice enough night and he wasn't sleepy, so he took the 101 west, away from the Valley. The Avanti shot down the road and for a time he wasn't even himself, just a moving speck of light brightening the road mile by mile, the darkness always closing back in behind him.

He hit the coast again, a different coast, and then he blinked hot, dry eyes at his dark rearview and realized he needed to turn around and go home, because there were people waiting for him.

Johnny vs Stealth

He fought his way back down a long and winding road, but his destination always seemed just out of reach. Would it be better to stop trying? Let the road relax like a streamer and flutter where it wanted? Waking seemed like too much effort. Yeah.

“...Johnny, baby,” his mom was whispering urgently overhead, “Daniel is *very* nice, but it's been ten minutes and I have things to do today.”

And, and what?

“What?” he croaked. His face scrunched in confusion and he cracked his eyes to find her holding the phone, the handset in one hand, the mouthpiece pressed against her chest to muffle it. For a long moment, he didn't understand what any of this was supposed to mean, and then he did.

He rolled heavily onto his side to free a hand and stretched it into the air, trying to communicate without actually communicating. She relinquished the phone to his custody with an expression of great relief before disappearing out the door, like she thought if she didn't move quick enough, maybe the freak on the phone would somehow reach through the line and trap her in the room.

Johnny let his head collapse back to the pillow as he fitted the receiver to his ear and sort of grunted something approximating Daniel's name. It started with a D and ended with an l, anyway.

“Why Mrs. Lawrence,” and christ, he was so... much, “your voice has suddenly become very husky. I hope you don't think it inappropriate if I tell you that I find that intriguing and weirdly hot?”

“Mm,” said Johnny, letting his eyes close again. “In'propriate.”

Daniel dropped the joke, voice going slightly, if not terribly, more serious. “I know expecting much out of you right now would be unfair, so I'll just ask if you're okay and then pause for confirmation,” and then he actually paused for confirmation, so Johnny mumbled *roger that.* “Good, that's good. Not that I was worrying at all. I mean, you didn't call last night, which, like, I don't want you to think I'm becoming one of those controlling and possessive boyfriends and you can't have your own life, it's not like that, it's only you were upset

yesterday. But today's a new day and you say you're okay, and I'm going to be sensitive to your emotional needs and pretend you mean it, at least until I see you. I mean, I'm not going to make you try to talk about it over the phone, I'm not a monster."

"You're the best," said Johnny, digging his face deeper into the pillow. This seemed like it might go on for a while.

He let Daniel's voice wash over him, words fragmenting and disintegrating until they were nothing but warm pulses of cadence and emotion in his ear. Daniel was awake and cheerful. Daniel was happy to be talking to him. Blah blah, Johnny. Blah blah blah.

He was hard, but in that comfortable, low-buzz morning way that didn't need to rush to any sort of conclusion. His body was content to glide along the edges of pleasure, at least until he pushed a hand down into his boxers and palmed his dick, and then it stepped up its game and nudged back against the boundaries in his mind a little more. He squeezed himself and turned onto his front so he could press into the mattress.

"You haven't fallen back asleep, have you?" asked Daniel in his ear.

"No," he said on a soft sigh and rolled his hips.

If Daniel was here, he would be between Johnny and the mattress, and that'd be nice. When he spread his legs just the right amount, it created the perfect crease at his thigh and hip for Johnny's dick to ride. And sometimes Daniel would sit up in this half-curl position that Johnny would never admit respect for his ability to hold, because the ability probably came more from sheer horny willpower than actual muscles, he was sure of it. But anyway, Daniel liked to sit up so he could watch unblinking as Johnny's dick fucked against his body, and he never had to wonder what he was thinking about, because Daniel always, *always* told him.

What did he say? Right now he was talking about real estate or something, but what did he usually say? Something like:

Sex is one helluva drug, I guess, because I actually think your dick is really pretty now? And maybe it's because I have chicken legs, but it looks well, let's say nicely proportioned. Fuck, Johnny, you're so big. Do you, you think about it? It's so crazy to think about. But you ever wonder? How it would fit, I mean. You know I'm a hard worker. I can accomplish anything if I put my mind to it. It's like, like people who climb Mt. Everest, y'know? They don't do it because it's easy. They

want to push themselves. The satisfaction is in the hard work, and fuck, you're so hard right now, I don't know how I could take it, but I'm ready and willing, whenever you want to try—

Johnny's arm tensed and his whole lower body flexed as he ground into the warm island of his mattress. He bit his pillow as he came.

“Johnny,” said Daniel's suspicious voice from the receiver, which had tumbled a couple inches away, “are you still mostly asleep or are you doing something else?”

He sucked in a stealth steadying breath, put his head close to the phone and said, “I'm awake, I'm awake.”

If he realized what Johnny just did, it would be the end of all normal phone calls. Daniel must never know.

Johnny vs Axe-Murderers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daniel was practically jogging as he showed Johnny the place he said he was thinking of renting for his sensei's tree nursery. It was a little past six in the evening, so of course it was pitch black out; though standing in front of the building, Johnny kind of got the impression it was maybe always dark on this side of the tracks. The neighborhood had the feeling.

The building looked not entirely unlike something from one of the million ghost towns they passed on their road trip back in September. It had alternating rust-spotted corrugated metal siding with unpainted wood, broken windows and holes in the walls. The only reason it hadn't been knocked down in the name of urban renewal was probably because no one wanted to pay for the work team.

"Isn't it *great*?" enthused Daniel, standing at the top of the stoop and spreading his arms, like an axe-murderer wasn't about to loom out of the glass-less window at his back and make a grab for the smiling prick.

Johnny's hands tightened a little in his pockets. He made a nonverbal noise of neutral confirmation that he was paying attention, which was all Daniel needed to continue with the tour, anyway.

Daniel turned and dug in his pocket for the key the leasing office gave him, and Johnny hurried along to serve as back-up as he stepped inside.

"Oh, this is gonna be great, just great," said Daniel, carelessly wandering forward into the dark, cluttered room.

Johnny frantically looked for a light. He found the switch and flipped it, and somehow that was *worse*. The big, long room was full of junk: broken glass and tumbled boxes and furniture, all bisected with a rough-hewn wooden – conveyor belt? That was probably where the axe-murderer did the hand-chopping, he thought. There were cobwebs hanging over everything, like it hadn't been touched in a generation.

"So, you see the potential?" said Daniel, slapping a hand down on a table. He acted oblivious to the cloud of dust that wafted up into the

air right after. “And best part is – the agent said we could have everything inside! Mr. Miyagi would own it all.”

“Wow, that's – so generous,” said Johnny. His tone didn’t pass muster, but to be fair, he wasn’t trying very hard. Daniel’s smile crashed down.

“You don’t like it,” he said, accusing.

“This looks like a place someone got murdered in,” he said flatly. “And then even their ghost didn’t want to hang around after because it was too creepy.”

He looked at Johnny in disbelief. The sputtering began a moment later. “Okay, you just lack the vision necessary to see what this place can be. All it needs is a little sweeping, a little elbow grease and paint and it’s gonna be *amazing*. I’m going to have it looking like brand new in no time, just you wait, Negative Nancy.”

Johnny ignored all of that in favor of the tense. He cocked his head, narrowed his eyes. “Why are you talking like it’s already a done deal?”

Daniel’s impervious confidence finally suffered a momentary wobble. He rubbed the table at his hip and shifted on his feet. Looked down, mouth pushing out a little. Johnny stared at him in mounting horror.

“Okay, I made out the money order out this afternoon,” he admitted finally, flapping a hand. “Filled out the lease and everything.”

“*What*? But – you said you were staying home.”

Daniel gave him a strange look. The idiot.

Johnny put his hands over his face. He kept them there as Daniel’s exasperated, wheedling voice grew closer; as he put a hand on Johnny’s hip and used the other to try tugging his hands down, but Johnny was *committed*.

Finally Daniel gave up and rested against him, chin digging into his shoulder. He sighed gustily. “It’s fine. It’s fine that you don’t believe in me. I'm used to it, people never think I can do anything. But I’ll show you, and I’ll accept your groveling afterwards – either way, I’m sure it’ll be sexually satisfying. Though Johnny, I have to admit, your lack of confidence in this venture does kind of hurt my feelings.”

“Do you smell that?” asked Johnny into his hair, finally dropping his hands in favor of tucking them into Daniel’s back pockets. He ignored the pleased noise the other boy made, except maybe to flex his fingers a little, squeezing his ass. “I think a raccoon came in here and had babies and then it and all the babies died over in the corner.”

“I don’t smell anything,” lied Daniel. He’d lie about his own name if he thought it would lead to sex. Johnny was not having sex in this place.

“Did you even tell your sensei that he’s opening a tree shop? Or is the whole new business venture a surprise too?”

Daniel made a scoffing noise. “You don’t know him, he’s gonna love it. Dream come true.”

Johnny looked again at the cavernous room as Daniel continued blithely talking into his ear. For a very brief moment, the sheer belief in his voice made him wish he could see it too.

Chapter End Notes

> fifty chapters and they are finally at the tree shop. this is fine, totally fine. excuse me while I go wail in despair over my coffee.

Johnny vs Making Sense

“Bet you've changed your tune now, huh,” said Daniel, falling back with a triumphant sigh and tucking his head into the space between Johnny's arm and shoulder. “Suddenly you realize what a fantastic place this is, you see it. Don't worry, I won't make you say I was right.”

They've moved the Avanti behind the shop. Between the train tracks, the building, and the derelict scrub land back there, they were pretty well hidden from anyone on the street. Johnny wasted no time putting the seat down and stretching out beneath the light pollution.

“Good,” said Johnny, “because you *aren't* right. We're still parked in the Avanti – we could do this anywhere.”

“Yeah, for now – just wait until I get the place cleaned up.” And he passed his hand in a wiping motion in the air above their heads, like he was displaying a shelf full of glittering bullshit for purchase. Johnny thought Daniel would probably have made good as one of those shady guys who went around in the Great Depression trying to sell mineral oil as a cure for people's arthritis or whatever.

He shifted his head on his folded arm and squinted at the sky. “Wasn't it like. A week ago, you were worried about disrespecting your sensei's *tent*? Now you want to have sex in his dream shop?”

“I feel like you're arguing with me just to argue with me,” reflected Daniel, sounding annoyingly superior. He didn't answer the question.

They were quiet for a while, and Johnny let his eyes lose focus, smearing the already hazy purple and black sky into further oblivion. His body felt very tired, even though he hadn't really done anything all day. He shifted his foot at his ankle, thought about stamping it. If he had a hand free, he might of pinched his side. He didn't want to fall asleep out here. He could sleep at home, alone.

“Your friends all okay?” asked Daniel quietly at one point. “You didn't really say. How'd they take the news.”

His stomach twisted. “It wasn't – it was fine. I mean, Tommy got mad and stormed off, and things kind of fell apart. But I think they're fine.” Johnny paused and added, words rushing out, “More than fine. I think they were almost – glad.”

Daniel turned onto his side so his face was resting on his chest, but when Johnny glanced down at him, he was looking at the side of the Avanti, eyes sharp. Thinking.

For some reason, Johnny flushed. “It's not that I'm ignoring everything. He was an asshole. I know that. And maybe, maybe I'm even relieved? Or something. I don't know.”

Daniel reached behind himself, groping for Johnny's left hand. He met him halfway, and Daniel tangled their fingers. He still didn't say anything; it was a little unnerving.

Johnny rolled his head a little, reset his gaze to the sky. He focused on the weight on his chest rather than the weight in his chest and he said:

“You know, I was – I was never good at anything? Before karate, I mean. My whole life, I was just,” dumb, slow, distracted, too quiet or way too loud at all the wrong moments, “and the stupid thing is, I didn't even realize it for a long time. Not really, not until we moved in with Sid. And then it was like I was just, dead weight. Luggage or something. And I thought there had to be *something*. Something I could be good for.” Good *at*, he meant. But he didn't correct himself.

Daniel was holding himself very still, mouth pressed hard into Johnny's ribs.

“Anyway,” he said quickly, thinking: just get it over with, get through it. Then they could make out and pretend this hadn't happened. “Sensei didn't think I was any good either at first, but he didn't tell me to fuck off. He didn't make it sound like it was something I just – *was*, like that was it, end of story, you suck at karate. You stupid kid, what are you even doing here. He saw someone else. I didn't know who. Still don't, I guess.”

And after everything, he was worried about what the man had seen. What if this whole time, Johnny thought it was one person, but it was someone else? And it was too late to do anything about it?

He risked another glance down and saw that Daniel had shut his eyes. But he didn't look like he was sleeping.

Johnny asked, “Does. Does that make any sense?”

“Yeah,” said Daniel.

Daniel vs Words Johnny Will Hear

He wasn't stupid or oblivious, he knew Johnny didn't always listen to him. Usually he didn't mind so much. The two of them always ended up averaging most things out in the end, and this was no exception. He figured if Johnny didn't always listen but Daniel talked a whole bunch, the net communication probably ended up being about where it should be for two people. He hoped, anyway. (And if he was wrong, it wouldn't be the first time he persuaded himself through his own superior logic that his current mode of behavior was correct, actually.)

But their usual equation became unbalanced in moments like this, when he was pretty sure Johnny *was* listening but Daniel didn't actually know what to say.

Luckily they had back-up communication protocols in place.

Johnny was a quiet guy, but his body usually said plenty. Right now, it said *could you?* And Daniel shifted up and over and put his arms around him like he had any chance of blocking out the rest of the world but he was willing to give it his all, because *yeah, of course, dummy.*

There was plenty of stuff he could say. No shortage of words sprang to mind. Mostly a lot of stuff about how much of a dick his stepdad was, and Kreese not much better. It was only – he suddenly wasn't sure this was something he could or even should speak on. It's not like the other boy didn't know.

Johnny was a physical learner; he learned by watching and thinking and then in very short order, doing. Whatever was bugging him these days, he probably needed to figure it out himself. It was the only way it might take.

But Daniel wished he could help.

Daniel raised his head and rested the point of his chin on the other boy's chest so he could look at him. Johnny was staring at the sky like it was an enemy he was analyzing for weak spots. If anyone could find one up there, it'd be him. Supposedly there was a hole in the ozone layer, they should put Johnny on that.

He wished he could tell him that his way of thinking was all wrong, like usual. He wished he could tell him what you *do* isn't the same as

who you *are* – except Daniel didn't think he believed that, actually. He'd seen too much of what people do.

But anyway, wasn't that good? If what you do is who you are, then that meant you could always change. You could become better, like Mr. Miyagi's friend Sato (or you could become worse, like that Silver guy said about Johnny's sensei).

Mostly, he wanted to tell Johnny he was fine, he was gonna be alright. He wasn't Kreese, and he wasn't – luggage, or whatever the fuck that was all about. He was just Johnny.

“When I look at you,” said Daniel quietly, “I know exactly who I see."

Daniel vs Miyagi's Dream

There were many reasons Daniel figured he and Mr. Miyagi were such great friends, and some of them approached the metaphysical in terms of like, basic soul compatibility, though Mr. Miyagi would probably affect mild, amused disbelief at the idea he had a soul anything like Daniel's, or maybe he wouldn't, at least not to Daniel's face, because he was such a good person, and it's not that Daniel was trying to call himself a good person here, but anyway: they both were early risers, and that was another reason they got along.

(Johnny was not an early riser. And sure, it was cute when Daniel witnessed it, because the other boy looked hi-*lari*ously innocent when he was sleeping; what a sweet face, no way does this baby karate-kick people through his dreams all night long. But when Daniel wasn't there to amuse himself with such thoughts while testing how much hair-petting one guy could withstand without waking up, Johnny's sleep habits drove him a little crazy. There was so much to do in the day, and why would you want to sleep through any of it? Johnny and he did not have basic soul compatibility. He didn't really know what they had, but it wasn't that.)

Anyway, he'd almost forgotten how much he loved mornings at Mr. Miyagi's place.

In Parsippany, the days had started with a turn of his uncle's television dial and then David Hartman talking over Joan Lunden, audible all throughout the house as Daniel cooked breakfast and organized meds and matters for the day. The family next door had a pair of twins that were homeschooled, and their playful shouting usually roused the mutt in the yard across the street, and the chaotic mix of noise didn't usually die down for an hour or two.

Here, back home, Daniel woke up and stepped out of his room into the garden, all the plants still shimmering with dew, the sky opening up for him, and he felt perfectly quiet. Quiet like Mr. Miyagi-quiet, like Johnny-quiet.

For a while, in the mornings, he was exactly where he was supposed to be, exactly who he was supposed to be, and he felt unstoppable.

“So,” said Daniel casually over his shoulder as he washed the breakfast dishes, “you know how you were probably thinking of retirement? Kicking back with a set of chopsticks and trying to catch that fly I already got, maybe do some fishing and gardening on the side when that got boring?”

And maybe he was more loud than casual, because when he glanced over, Mr. Miyagi was resting his hands atop the table and looking at him, alert. Like: what has Daniel-san done now? Well, just wait.

He finished rinsing the last dish and hurriedly stacked it in the rack and then turned, toweling his hands dry. Excitement and nerves coursing through his body; this was kinda everything.

He tossed the dishtowel aside and spread his arms wide. “I got something to show you. You're gonna *love* it.”

Mr. Miyagi totally loved it.

Like, once he stopped looking so grim and stunned, and once he got over the whole college savings and education thing, yeah, yeah, and once Daniel rushed him out of the house and into the truck and across town to the shop and he saw the neighborhood in the daylight (after Johnny's reaction, Daniel figured daylight would make for a better first impression; he could be flexible about things sometimes), and once he explained about all the stuff in the shop they could use to build the shelves, and offered a few of the ideas he had for layout – Mr. Miyagi loved it.

Daniel knew Mr. Miyagi really loved it, because he promoted Daniel from free labor to partner on the spot. And he stopped Daniel from hugging him, which he only did when he was feeling too much.

In the dusty morning sunlight pouring through the glass doors they would need to wash sometime, Daniel looked into Mr. Miyagi's smiling eyes and slowly bowed. When he straightened again, he'd never felt taller.

Daniel vs Labor-Management Relations

“Hey, hey!” called Daniel. And when his worker glanced around, bemused, he asked, “What are you doing?”

Johnny looked down at the shelf in his hands, brow low. “I'm... throwing it on the junk pile?”

“Yeah, exactly – *don't.* That piece is salvageable.”

He paused. He looked from Daniel to the piece and lifted it, slowly pulling at either side; the wooden legs slid loosely around in the air. “It is junk,” he said emphatically. His expression was little insulting, if he was being honest.

“All that can be tightened,” insisted Daniel, flapping a hand. Johnny's confusion was understandable: he was rich and had never dealt with secondhand furniture, or budgets. He hadn't ever helped build an entire guest room, either, so his construction knowledge probably paled next to Daniel's.

Johnny rolled his eyes and shook his head, but when he turned away, it was to put the shelf down in the keep pile.

It was the early afternoon, of course, because his work team of one probably slept in. But that was okay; Daniel was feeling very tolerant because Johnny was wearing a shirt with no sleeves and his headband, and if Daniel was less of a professional, he'd be thinking about what a great start to a porno this would make, but he's at work now and so was keeping his mind strictly on business matters.

Mr. Miyagi was making a thorough inspection of the entire building, notepad and measuring tape in hand. When Johnny had shown up, he took one look at him and nodded and waved to the cluttered interior, muttering a distracted, *inside, inside*, and Johnny hurried to join Daniel like it was a command barked by a drill sergeant wearing cop sunglasses. Daniel didn't know if that was funny or sad.

Daniel was sorting the inside, mostly supervising at this point. He had a clipboard to keep inventory of what they were keeping, and as he propped it against his stomach, he worked on perfecting a stick figure of Johnny (inverted triangle body, frown, and no eyes but a line to indicate his hair; this made Stick Johnny look like he had a bowl cut, which was a problem Daniel was still mulling the solution to).

He glanced up again to see his worker hauling yet another perfectly good piece of wood to the junk pile. He sighed and got up to set him straight.

“You've got to be kidding me,” said Johnny flatly. He waved the old wooden fruit box in the air above his head, incidentally showcasing a nice range of arm muscles, hey. “What could you possibly want with this?”

“It could be cleaned up. It'd look like, rustic. Charmingly rustic. Maybe we'd turn it into a planter for the front or something.”

Johnny grabbed the other end of the fruit box and flipped it between his hands to show him the interior. Daniel looked; noted; shrugged.

“What?”

“That's mold,” said Johnny helpfully.

“So we'll wipe it down first.”

“This is wood. If it's already rotting—”

“Whoa, hey, it's not rotting, that's just some fuzz, let's not get carried away. I can sand it down. When I – just wait – I'll show you a thing or two about sanding. I'm a pro at this point.”

“I am putting this in the junk pile,” he said.

Daniel put his hands on his hips. “Just who is in charge here, anyway?”

“In char— not *you*!” Johnny's eyes dropped to the clipboard stuck under his arm. They narrowed and he cocked his head. “Have you been standing there *doodling* this whole time?”

“No.” Daniel raised his chin and casually turned the clipboard around so the paper was hidden. He took a step back, which was a strategic mistake, because it only made Johnny take a step forward. Ah, when will he learn. “Okay, okay, you should – you should get back to work, we got a lotta stuff to clear out of here before we can clean, and—”

“Show me the clipboard,” said Johnny, continuing to advance.

Daniel decided to go for broke and put a table between them. Workers! You can never trust them not to cause trouble.

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“It's... classified.”

Johnny stepped to the left to get around the table and Daniel edged further around it. The other boy straightened.

“Seriously?”

Daniel shrugged. He was about to tell Johnny again to get back to work: fruit box goes on the *keep* pile, thank you very much, but then the other boy – jumped neatly *over* the table, what the fuck – and grabbed him.

“Ohmygod, you goddamn gorilla,” he yelped, and Johnny laughed into his hair and reached for the clipboard, but Daniel wasn't about to give it up easy, no sir, he was pretty sure he's played this arcade game, and at the end the Italian guy beats Kong, so he twisted in the air, feet catching the table and kicking it a loud, grinding couple feet across the floor.

"Treaty of Buffalo," shouted Daniel, to no avail.

He was almost upside down and hitting Johnny's side vigorously with the clipboard when Mr. Miyagi came back inside.

Daniel blinked at the man through the pressure of the blood rushing to his head and said, “We've experienced a work-stoppage.”

Daniel vs Good Luck, Johnny

Once Johnny put him down and turned hastily back to the sorting piles, face a deep red, and once Daniel casually dragged the table he'd kicked back into position, Mr. Miyagi beckoned him over. There was a slight question in his eyes, and Daniel didn't know how to answer it, or even broach the subject.

He remembered his plans to ease into things: to gradually, maybe, sort of get the point across without overtly talking about it at first. Like, he thought if he just treated Johnny like he was Kumiko or Ali or something, Mr. Miyagi would *get* it, and then nothing would have to be explained. This plan would work a lot better if Johnny didn't like to rough-house. Kumiko and Ali weren't prone to throwing Daniel over their shoulder.

Daniel chewed on his lip and kind of grinned at Mr. Miyagi like absolutely nothing strange was happening in the shop, nope.

Mr. Miyagi sighed and lifted a piece of paper. “List for hardware store. You go.”

He didn't glance around at Johnny, but it was a near thing. “What, now?” And when the man's eyebrows went up: “Right, now. Yeah, sure, I can do that. There's the – the one on the way here, that's right. Passed it this morning. Okay.” And he took the list, glancing down at the page, the tiny, neat bulleted list. “This is a lot of stuff.”

Mr. Miyagi patted his shoulder and stepped past him. “Building need lot of work. Will be good, you see.”

“Yeah, I know it will,” he said absently, turning in place, still reading the list. He looked up and past him to where Johnny was stacking some boards on the throw pile; oh, he wasn't going to be thrilled about this. Oh, well. Had to happen sometime. He raised his voice a little and announced, “Okay, I'll be back.”

Johnny's head turned so fast, Daniel was surprised he didn't tweak something. His eyes were a little wide; that universal expression of *I am horrified but trying to politely hide it but I also really want you to know I am horrified* with a little *I'm going to put you in a headlock, Daniel* thrown in for good measure.

Sorry! Daniel mouthed back and shrugged.

He'd make it up to him later, he figured.

Daniel vs Rules of Life

He was just climbing out of the truck on the street in front of the hardware store, patting his pockets for the list, when an unfamiliar voice called out:

“Oh – hey, Daniel, right?”

He looked around and found the voice belonged to a man in a pale blue convertible two spots down from the truck. After a moment, he recognized him.

“Mr. Silver?” he said, approaching.

He glanced over the car, a little distracted by how automatically his brain registered and judged, *oh wow, Johnny would hate that*. It was a sickness, contagious; Daniel didn't want to become one of those car-obsessed guys. This was the ugly side of infatuation. There had been a brief moment the previous spring where he almost learned how to play golf, like *real* golf, because Ali mentioned playing sometimes with her folks. So Daniel knew he really needed to watch himself.

“You live around here or something?” he asked the man, because this was kind of a random place for someone to hang around.

Mr. Silver hesitated the barest of moments and smiled a little ruefully. “It's my neighborhood, yeah.”

Ah. Explained the car. Daniel felt a surge of fellow feeling; he knew shitty neighborhoods. He put a hand on his hip and nodded around the street. “Well, I hear it's about to be up-and-coming, so be sure to watch that rent.”

He blinked. “I'll – do that. Hey, listen,” and he climbed out of his sad car, which was unfortunate for Daniel because he kind of liked his neck where it was, didn't particularly enjoy having to crane it. “I just saw you and thought I'd ask – kept kicking myself for how the other day went down – your boyfriend, is he alright? How's he holding up?”

No one had ever referred to Johnny as his boyfriend before. Daniel's face went a little warm, and he automatically glanced around; for what, he didn't know.

“Oh, he's – he'll be okay. Johnny's always okay,” he added after a

moment, because it was true: eventually, and so long as Daniel had anything to say about it.

Mr. Silver nodded and folded his arms across his broad chest, strong forearms flexing. He smiled again, head inclined and squinting at Daniel against the sunlight. “Ah, one of those? A tough customer.”

Daniel wished he could tell if the man was trying to make something of it. He shifted on his feet, a little uncertain. “Yeah, well – what's it to you?”

He raised his hands, expression flickering open. “Nothing, nothing. I'm very familiar with the strong, silent types, is all.” He gave him a meaningful look, and Daniel finally got it.

“Oh, you're – oh.” He sighed soundlessly, relieved. “Sorry if I sounded rude, really, I just—”

Mr. Silver laughed it off. “Hey, no, I get it. Believe me. You're smart to be cautious. I know what it's like, when you're young and you don't know anyone else who is like you. That's why I stopped when I saw you – call it a, ah. Concern. From an older member of the community to a younger.”

“Community. You mean like,” *The Gay Community* flashed across the front of his mind in eight-foot-tall rainbow balloon lettering. His eyes skittered away. “Uh.”

“Oh, kid, you don't even know. It's like a whole other world just inside this one, and you can't see it unless you know to look for it.”

Daniel scratched his hairline in the back. “I mean, me and Johnny, we're – it's not. We're fine.” And he doesn't really know what he's saying, except the man sounded like he was trying to sell him on something, and he only wanted to politely imply he wasn't looking to buy.

“You two seemed fine,” agreed Mr. Silver. “The world can feel like it's very far away, I remember that.” He paused, eyes going distant. “You feel unstoppable when you're in love.”

Daniel's face went from warm to hot in a second like Johnny pushing the gas pedal, and suddenly he had no words. He blinked hard and looked down.

“Look, I'll let you get on with your errands,” said Mr. Silver, shifting

down the side of the car to the door; oblivious to Daniel's tongue-tied shock. “I just thought I'd stop and say – you know, if you ever need someone to talk to, someone who understands. I'm always available. I live my life by the rule, y'know: if you get, you give. We queers need to stick together. I mean, this is Reagan's America, right?”

It felt like crossing a stream, and suddenly the next rock he hopped on turned beneath his foot; the word *love* was still banging around his head, and now the man was referencing – well. It wasn't something he'd spent too long thinking about; it always seemed like – headlines, before. Something to do with other people. What did Reagan or America have to do with him and Johnny?

“Right,” he said after a moment. He rubbed his hand on his jeans and blinked up at him. “Uh, thanks. Yeah, thanks, Mr. Silver.”

“Call me Terry,” he said. “We're not in a dojo, we're just two guys standing in the street.”

“Sure, right.”

He looked at Daniel sympathetically. “Look, how about this – why don't I give you my number, and you can toss it, or you can shove it in a drawer and never think about it again. But if you ever need advice or just someone to talk to – about your boyfriend, dealing with your family, whatever – you can call me.”

And Daniel had rules of his own he liked to live by, and rejecting open hands of friendship went against everything he knew or felt.

He smiled finally. “I'd like that.”

Johnny vs Metaphors

Daniel disappeared out the front with a jaunty wave, leaving Johnny standing alone between the piles of scrap wood on the back loading dock. He was suddenly awkward and clumsy in his own body as he slowly continued shifting furniture.

He glanced repeatedly over his shoulder, watching for Daniel's sensei as he disappeared back inside; maybe he was going to leave Johnny to his own devices? But no, the relief was short-lived. He reemerged, looking around at Johnny.

“What boys do?” he asked, and Johnny's stomach dropped.

“Oh, nothing, really,” he said quickly, straightening up. “We just – hang out sometimes. Sir.”

Mr. Miyagi blinked at him. Johnny stared back (unblinking). After a painful moment, he realized the man was asking about the work piles.

He didn't apologize, just tried to move past it despite the rush of blood to his face. He pointed at the pile nearest to the man and said, “That's for keeping. This one's junk.”

Mr. Miyagi nodded absently and inspected them. He shook his head and muttered something too low for Johnny to hear, and picked up the damn moldy fruit box. He turned it over in his hands, angling it under the sun to study the interior. And Johnny didn't want to seem like he was throwing Daniel under the bus, but honestly, he kind of thought Daniel deserved to be under a goddamn train at the moment, so he pointed a little and said:

“Uh, that's – Daniel said to keep it. He – a planter? Or something. He said he could wipe it down. Or something.”

Mr. Miyagi shook his head. “Daniel-san has good heart,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Johnny, because it was true.

Mr. Miyagi turned and decisively tossed the fruit box on the junk pile. “But sometimes make poor decision. Paint nice, but wood weak. Not worth effort.”

Johnny stared down at the fruit box, now balanced atop the the stack of other filthy, broken pieces of wood.

He could see why Daniel had wanted to keep it: the blue ribbon and red apples on the outside were still bright and vibrant, eye-catching. And the pale grain of the wood looked clean and solid; you wouldn't know the inside was soft and furred with mold.

Sanding, he had said? Johnny wondered how many layers down he would've gone before admitting defeat. Maybe he wouldn't – who was he kidding, it was Daniel. He wouldn't. He would've wiped and sanded and then tried to use it, and maybe the first time he put any weight in the box the bottom would've cracked and splintered down, and the idiot would've been left standing there with soil and broken plant all over his shoes. All that time and effort leading to nothing but a mess.

A sharp clap startled him from his thoughts, and his head jerked up.

Mr. Miyagi looked at him closely for a long moment. Then he gestured, commanding and brusque. “Come. Help Miyagi move table.”

Johnny hurried to step up into the shop. As he passed him, Mr. Miyagi added quietly, dark eyes sharp:

“Not everything metaphor, Lawrence-san.”

Johnny vs A Complete Failure at Small Talk

They made more progress in an hour than he and Daniel had in three; Johnny didn't know if that was a point against Daniel or a point against him. He kept thinking about it, but he was pretty sure the man wasn't trying to secretly teach him any karate through the labor of lifting heavy furniture.

(Daniel always made it sound like he couldn't sweep a floor without picking some move up. Maybe in that kid's eternal optimism, he hadn't realized he was just being used for chores. Or maybe Johnny was missing something, he didn't know.)

“So, uh, trees,” he said eventually, once they'd cleared most of the main room.

Mr. Miyagi's eyes came down from the rafters, and all the junk sitting up there above their heads. He met Johnny's eyes, and the effect was fairly obliterating. How did Daniel get to know this guy?

(It was a dumb question. If aliens ever landed on Earth, they could send Daniel as the greeting party and everything would go swell.)

“You're going to sell – uh, little trees,” he said, a little lamely.

“Bonsai,” said Mr. Miyagi.

“Bonsai, yeah.”

“*Bon*sai.”

Johnny didn't hear the difference, and in his awkwardness committed to avoiding the word altogether. “Right.” But he couldn't leave it there, not with the man looking at him like that. “How, how did – you get into that?”

How does anyone get into anything? Johnny was always wondering. Maybe the guy would have some tips, or something.

“Father,” said the man stoutly.

Or not.

“How Lawrence-san *get into* fighting?” he asked, turning fully to face him, and alright, apparently this was suddenly happening.

Johnny straightened up a little, like he might've in a dojo, back when he had a dojo. He was already aware of the emptiness of the shop, but the space suddenly felt different – like maybe they'd cleared it for this, for the inevitable. A stretch of open floor and air to properly face off over, and no Daniel to play buffer.

Mr. Miyagi didn't look like he was expecting a fight or argument – but then, he never had. Even when he was facing down Sensei, he hadn't.

(Through his dwindling air and climbing panic, he glimpsed this same calm face.)

Why had he chosen karate? He tried to remember.

“I needed it,” he said. That wasn't an answer. He shifted and said quickly, “I mean, I thought – I thought it looked,” no, that sounded stupid, what the hell, “I just wanted. I made friends, and—”

But Mr. Miyagi pinched his eyebrows and shook his head. He lifted a hand and dismissed the babble. Johnny fell silent, and was almost grateful for it, even though he felt like there was a splinter lodged in his throat.

“Why Lawrence-san *fight*?” he asked. “Now?”

Johnny vs Thanks

“I don't,” said Johnny. “I mean, I don't really – do karate anymore.”

He thought of the one kata he already knew and almost felt guilty; but only almost. He couldn't regret what Daniel had shown him, or how it had felt. And it wasn't like he was using it to go around attacking random people on the street with the power of this man's defensive kata. He felt nothing but respect when he did it, and surely that was what mattered.

It did remind him, though. Maybe now, with Daniel not there to intervene or make him feel weird about it, maybe now was the time—

“I never said thanks,” he said abruptly, and he knew what he should probably actually be saying is *sorry*, like that Silver guy said sorry. But it was easier to say thanks. “For last year. Thanks.”

Mr. Miyagi nodded curtly, slapped a hand through the air: a cousin to Daniel's own gesture, but one that felt more businesslike than scoffing. “Welcome. Miyagi sure teacher would have stopped.”

He turned away then, apparently ready to resume work, leaving Johnny wrong-footed and confused. Finally, he realized the man was referring to December, after the All Valley. The parking lot. He thought Johnny was thanking him for the parking lot; and he probably should for that as well, huh.

He shifted on his feet and looked around the empty room. “Yeah, maybe he would've,” he said awkwardly to his back. “But maybe not. I, I didn't. I mean, not in the tournament and not – not before.” He watched as the man paused and turned again, made himself stand there and meet his eyes. “By the fence. Halloween.”

Mr. Miyagi regarded him silently, and he felt the air between them go sort of solid with it, with the memory and shame.

He remembered groaning and curling inward over the dirt, and then looking around in belated panic for the next coming blow. But the fight was apparently over as quickly as it had started. All he spied when he raised his head was the strange man carrying Daniel away through the dark: the other boy limp, dead to the world. Johnny had been so confused.

Who the fuck was that? asked Dutch.

Guys, guys – my arm, said Tommy.

How are we supposed to explain this? To our parents, our Sensei? Well, Johnny? said Bobby.

And Jim didn't say anything at all, or look any of them in the eye for the rest of the night.

“We didn't believe in mercy,” he tried to explain to the man.

“And now?” Mr. Miyagi asked again.

“Of course,” he said, and the man nodded, half-turned away, and something unclenched in Johnny's chest. He breathed out in relief. “I mean, if they deserve it, absolutely.”

For some reason, Mr. Miyagi paused again and looked back at him, but before he could say anything, Daniel's voice was hollering from the front steps:

“Truck's full, and it's not gonna empty itself. And can someone get this door, please? C'mon, do I gotta do everything around here?”

Johnny hurriedly crossed the floor and opened the door, allowing the other boy to shoulder inside with his burden, a paper sack of hardware and supplies.

Daniel paused and looked around in surprise at the room: the long stretch of bare wood flooring and dusty windows. “Oh, whoa.”

And yeah, it suddenly looked brighter inside. Johnny wasn't sure if that was because he hadn't been paying enough attention while moving furniture, or if this was some terrible sappy thing where everything looked better when Daniel was around. He squinted slightly at the nearest window.

“This is already looking great,” said Daniel, setting the sack down. He grinned at Mr. Miyagi and twisted to share it with Johnny. “What'd I tell you? This place is really going to be something.”

Johnny rolled his eyes and slipped gratefully outside to go empty the truck.

Johnny vs The Truth About Who Killed JFK

“You must be sore,” said Daniel, after they closed up the shop in the early evening and drove to the pool house.

Johnny wandered through the small space, checking to see if his mom was home. He glanced over his shoulder, eyebrow raised. “Oh, you mean because I did all the work?”

“Hey,” he said, protesting. He came up to Johnny and grabbed his wrist with both hands, started walking backwards. Johnny let himself be towed along to his bedroom, smiling a little down at him.

“I did a lot of the cleaning,” said Daniel, eyes unshadowed and virtuous. “Those windows were sparkling by the time I finished with them.”

“The ones that weren't broken,” he agreed, leaning in. He was about to kiss him, but Daniel had other ideas and stepped to the side, shoved him down to the bed.

“Straight to it, huh,” said Johnny.

“I'm going to give you a back rub.” He hands went to Johnny's shirt. “C'mon, up. Off with it.”

It was the ultimate Daniel LaRusso move; Johnny even believed the other boy believed in his own good intentions. Oh, his boyfriend must be sore, so *clearly* he should strip and spread himself out for Daniel to tend to; Johnny predicted this back rub would last less than five minutes.

His eyes skated over the clock on his bedside table as he pulled the shirt off and shifted around to lie on his stomach. Daniel's hands landed on his back, fingers gliding over the skin.

Five minutes max, thought Johnny. He tucked his grin into his folded arms and closed his eyes. Not like he was going to turn down a back rub. Daniel's hands skated up his sides, executed a swirling twist around his shoulder blades. His thumbs dug into the thick muscle along his spine and okay, okay, he was a little sore.

“That's what I thought,” said Daniel, a little smug. He quit leaning over him and hopped up to straddle his back.

The next couple minutes melted along with Johnny sinking heavily into his bed as Daniel pressed and kneaded the hot ache right out of his shoulders and back, sending it meandering elsewhere, mostly south. The other boy started humming, and that didn't help matters; by now, Johnny's body had a weird instinctive response to Daniel humming. Humming meant focus, intent. It was like the other boy touched Johnny's body and started hearing music.

“So,” said Daniel casually, “you guys talk about anything while I was out?”

Johnny grunted a little. “No, not really.” He thought about it. “He threw out your moldy fruit box.”

“No, not really,” repeated Daniel. His sigh gusted over Johnny's back. “I mean, I'll never know for sure, will I? You guys are like Russian nesting dolls of silence. You could've discovered a shared passion for country-western music,” *what?* asked Johnny, “or like, probed the deep corners of the human psyche, but you'd both take it to your graves, like it's a state secret, like who killed JFK or something.”

“The FBI.”

Daniel's hands slowed. “What?”

Johnny turned his head to free his mouth. “The FBI killed JFK.”

Daniel stared down at him, aghast. “The FBI didn't kill JFK. The mob did. Why would the FBI kill the president?”

And Johnny didn't know, it was something Sid always said, and he sounded pretty sure. He hadn't ever thought to question it. His brow knit, wondering what else there was he thought he knew.

Meanwhile, he said, “I don't know. Why do you think the mob killed him?”

“It was over a girl, probably. Aren't most things?”

“That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard,” said Johnny. He glanced at the clock.

But now Daniel was getting distracted. Johnny shouldn't have said anything. The other boy planted his hands unmoving on the small of Johnny back, shifted on his perch but not in a sexy way, and said down to him:

“It's *not* stupid. Marilyn Monroe, man. Ever hear of her? Frank Sinatra was in love with Marilyn, and obviously he was all mobbed up. And Kennedy was totally making it with her, and then she died under suspicious circumstances—”

And now Johnny was confused. “How do you know all this?”

“My ma's magazines back home. Anyway, so then Frankie's heartbroken, and heartbroken Italian men, they make bad decisions – I mean, look at me, I decided to hitchhike across the country when it was me.”

“He admits it. He finally admits it,” muttered Johnny. He narrowed his eyes at the clock, the ticking minute hand.

“So Frankie reaches out to his old friends in the mob, and they go, are you sure, he's the president. And he was probably like, nobody treats my girl like that, and then boom, sorry Jackie.”

Five minutes and he didn't even get the full back rub. Oh well. Johnny twisted suddenly and took hold of an unsuspecting Daniel, still contemplating the soap opera that was the sixties. He rolled them over the mattress and pinned his arms above his head.

“Oh,” said Daniel, already going pink.

“Oh,” said Johnny, and he bent down to kiss him quiet.

Johnny vs Psychoanalyzing

Johnny had a theory about why Daniel liked it when he pinned him down.

He smirked against Daniel's mouth and used his knees to trap the other boy's, stop them from spreading and getting a hold of him. This left Daniel with only one direction to go, which was straining up against Johnny, and Johnny wondered if this could be utilized in strength training at all: how many inches could Daniel get his hips off the mattress with Johnny's weight over him? It could be like a weighted hip thrust, and that was something to think about, like, later.

Daniel was pretty equal opportunity however-he-can-get-it when it came to Johnny's body, sure, and he liked being in his lap almost as much as Johnny liked having him there. Johnny suspected at least part of Daniel's enjoyment of *that* position came from being able to look down at him instead of up for once. But he was also a massive control freak, and being on top meant he got to do whatever he wanted to him. Yeah, Daniel liked all the positions.

But he only ever blushed when he was under Johnny.

He could feel the heat of the blush against his cheeks when he turned to kiss Daniel's jaw. (Mouth thus freed, Daniel did what Daniel was gonna do, and you'd think someone would talk less when flustered, but Johnny guessed they were just made different that way.)

Daniel's hands roved over his bare back; slid down and squeezed beneath his waistband to help themselves out.

“Should've offered a full body massage,” said Daniel, full of regret. “Why are you still wearing—”

“You're *fully clothed*, man,” he said against his neck.

“Hey, you want your masseuse to be naked, that costs extra, pal.”

He levered himself up on one elbow and dropped his free hand to the button of Daniel's shorts – flattening his hand briefly against his hip to keep him down, because the other boy would take any sliver and try to make it an opening.

Johnny raised an eyebrow down at him. “What's this gonna cost me?”

“Oh, y'know, the market's really in flux right now,” said Daniel vaguely, red-faced and grinning.

He helped Johnny drag his shorts down; muttered some insane shit about currency exchange as he undid Johnny's own jeans and generally shoved and demanded until they were kicked off. By the time Johnny had him hot and hard beneath him again, he was pretty sure Daniel had completely lost track of the metaphor. Which meant it was time to kiss him again, reset his brain.

Daniel, he figured, liked having something to push against. He liked being sure about things and people, and there was no better way to be sure of something than being pinned by it. Johnny's arms became a place, one he didn't just belong in but *owned*; he let himself be greedy about it, about this one thing in the world. And Johnny didn't exactly mind.

He nudged Daniel's knees together again, trapping his hard dick against his stomach, and flexed down once, twice, testing the friction. Not finding it sufficient, he broke the kiss and dropped his forehead to Daniel's chest, breathing hard. He tilted his own hips so he could get a hand around both of them, and this could be a place too: or at least a destination, something to head towards. Johnny'd drive them all the way.

Daniel loud over his head, urging him on. Backseat driver.

Daniel liked having something to push against, but since he was kind of an idiot, this meant he sometimes made mistakes, jumped a little early in judgment. And he never learned from these mistakes, because usually it all worked out somehow anyway. This was how he won last year, and how he found his sensei; when he was right, he was usually really *right*.

Johnny held him down and kept a steady hand on them both until Daniel was gasping and limp, a pliable tangle of limbs beneath him; lips soft and wordless under his, for the moment.

Johnny wanted to him to be right about Johnny.

Johnny vs Who's There

“So, what do you think?” asked Daniel, a while later. “Fresno?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Johnny, and he wasn't being a bad boyfriend who didn't listen if he knew Daniel would probably bring whatever it was up again at least ten times before it actually mattered. Sure, Fresno. Why not.

They were sitting on his bed still, up against the wall. Daniel was carelessly half-naked, leaning his shirt-covered back against his chest and absently jiggling his bare leg against Johnny's stretched out across the mattress. He dug his elbow into Johnny's thigh as he leaned sideways to dig into the depths of his pudding cup with a scoop made of the bent metal top.

“Sorry we don't have any actual food,” said Johnny. He swiped at the smear of chocolate pudding on Daniel's lip and licked it absently off his finger. “Last time my mom had to do the shopping, I was a lot younger.”

Daniel shrugged. “Eh, haven't had pudding cups since I was like, fourteen. This is kinda great.”

“Maybe I should start doing the shopping,” said Johnny, looking out the door of his room and thinking about the fridge. His mom really wasn't very good at it, which made him guilty to even *think*. But, like, maybe this was something he could be good at? How hard could it be, anyway? He was pretty good at eating; surely he could just walk into some place and throw whatever he knew they liked to eat in a basket. His mom liked fancy salads and tenderloin cuts. He could figure that out, probably.

Daniel's tossed the empty pudding cup aside, and his newly freed hands immediately began playing with the leg of Johnny's boxers. Johnny didn't know why he even bothered pulling them back on, except that walking to the kitchen and back completely naked felt kind of scandalous. The pool house being a literal glass house and all.

His bedroom was different; the evening light from the window was made hazy by the curtain and all the shadows lay quiet in the corners, cushioning them from everything outside the room.

His hands slid under Daniel's shirt to hold his waist as the other boy

shifted around to face him. Johnny was sort of thinking about how he probably tasted like chocolate now, and Daniel's eyes were warm on his, his mouth curling up into a smile as he drifted in close, and for a moment they had enough time and space to do anything they wanted together, and then someone pounded hard on the pool house door in the other room.

Johnny's hands tightened before abruptly releasing Daniel. He went still and looked past to the doorway, like whoever it was might appear any moment in the opening.

Daniel's nose brushed his cheek as he glanced over his shoulder at the emptiness there and turned back to Johnny.

“A maid?” he asked, but he couldn't really believe it, because his voice had already become hushed.

Johnny shook his head slightly, skull rolling over the grain of the stucco wall. “We don't use the staff from the house. Most of them have been employed by him longer than we've lived here.”

“Maybe, maybe your mom forgot her keys—”

The knocking came again, heavy and imperious. Johnny didn't say anything, not even *does that sound like my mom knocking to you*?

He should get up, go out into the other room. See what the man wanted, or tell him to leave them alone. What if he stuck around, waiting until his mom came home?

But Johnny didn't move.

Daniel took hold of his arm and pulled while shifting up the bed, and when Johnny resisted for a second, his grip strengthened and became insistent. Johnny's eyes slid to his, and the other boy gave a wordless *well?*

It was easier to just go with it. He let Daniel draw him down to the pillows, and he watched, bemused, as the other boy lunged to the bottom of the mattress. That sure was a bare ass.

Daniel returned dragging the bedsheet heroically over his shoulders like a cape and wasted no time tugging it up over both their heads. “There,” he said.

“Seriously?” ghosted past Johnny's lips. “What are we, eight?”

Sid was still knocking.

Daniel reached for him in the darkness and curled in close, his arm coming up around Johnny's side, their legs tangling. “Did I tell you about the pottery place across the street from the shop?” he asked the underside of his chin. He followed up the question with a light kiss.

It'd probably only be a few minutes before it became hard to breathe in cloistered space beneath the sheet. But a few minutes was better than nothing.

“No,” said Johnny, even though he was pretty sure Daniel actually had. He ducked his face into his hair. “Tell me about the pottery shop.”

Johnny vs What He Can Do

Johnny looked at the long line of shopping carts tucked neatly together just inside the door of the store. He pictured what he'd look like, slowly nudging one around the aisles alongside all the wives and mothers, and thought: better not. He wasn't getting that much stuff, probably, and anyway, a basket was more his thing. It was like lifting weights, if he did it right.

He grabbed a basket and turned to face the produce section.

“I wish I could go tell him off,” Daniel had said. He was once again fully clothed and theoretically leaving. He looked narrowly out the windows of the main room at the pool, or more likely the house on the other side of it. Johnny looked at him, because he could see that damn house any day. “Man shouldn't talk to anyone like that, let alone his soon-to-be ex-stepson.”

He'd do it too, was the thing. And from his voice and attitude to the way he looked, there was nothing about the other boy that Sid wouldn't find fault with, and through fault a place to stick a verbal knife and twist. Johnny would drive the Avanti through the front door of the house and flatten Sid in his study before he let Daniel within earshot of him.

“Whatever, it's fine,” said Johnny. “Doesn't matter.”

And he pulled him around by his upper arm again so he'd stop looking. Clearly he needed to distract Daniel until he was safely away. So that's what he did, and it was easy, because Daniel was pretty easy, from the way he immediately tilted his head and opened his mouth for him, to the twist of his arms around Johnny's neck, the hot arch of his back under Johnny's hand—

In the store, Johnny considered a large pile of greenish bananas. He ate bananas, sometimes. In the big house, there was usually a couple sitting out, always perfectly ripe and ready to eat. He realized he didn't know how long it took for them to ripen; should he get several

of different shades? That way he'd be in bananas always. Except he didn't know that he needed to be in bananas always. He hadn't had one in months and never thought about it even once.

He grabbed a bunch of six, just in case his mom liked bananas.

Next he looked at the rows of greens: almost every variety indecipherable from the next, though the little hand-written signs along the top suggested there was maybe an important difference. Turnip and mustard greens, no, probably not. Lettuce was where it was at, he knew that much. Though even there he was confronted with another multiple choice test.

Was one type better than the rest for salads? Romaine sounded fancy. Iceberg, clearly the most badass. Green, not helpful. Red, also not helpful, because it wasn't even that red. He chose a head of each, figuring that was safest.

His basket was suddenly already half full.

“Okay, okay,” mumbled Daniel against his mouth. He followed the words up with sucking on Johnny's lower lip, and yeah, it was pretty okay. At least until Daniel broke off and dropped his arms and stepped back out of Johnny's embrace.

“What,” said Johnny.

“I gotta get up early these days," he explained, tugging his shirt back into place. He was hard in his shorts.

“You get up early every day,” he said, rolling his eyes. He reached for him just for the hell of it, because either Daniel tried to evade his grip, which would be funny, or he wouldn't and they could keep doing what they were doing. Either way, Johnny won.

And look at that: Daniel fell against him again, dragging his body up against his once, twice – and then he stepped back again.

“Wow,” said Johnny.

Daniel put up a finger. His face was flushed, and his eyes kept flickering down to Johnny's boxers, but he said, “I'm a working man, now. How do you expect me to pay the bills and put food on the table

if I'm falling asleep on the job?"

"You don't have any bills," said Johnny, stepping forward and reaching again – but this time Daniel backed up, looking sorely tested. "And you don't have to put food on anyone's table," he added belatedly.

"And I'll never be able to, that kind of attitude," said Daniel, tipping his chin.

He backed up towards the door, and it looked like this was really going to happen. If Johnny wasn't kind of disappointed, he'd be impressed with Daniel's grit. Of course, if he wanted to really test that grit, he'd do something awful like drop his boxers, get a hand around himself. But there was teasing and then there was torturing.

Johnny stopped and didn't sigh. He folded his arms over his bare stomach and ignored Daniel's flashing look of disappointment, because he was a good boyfriend.

"You guys need more help tomorrow?" he asked as Daniel reached for the door.

"Nah, I think we got most of the big stuff done today," said Daniel, like it was nothing. He grinned back at him. "You're free, young man! Try not to run too wild with it."

"Oh," said Johnny, shifting on his bare feet. "Right. Cool."

The lettuce was only the first of many annoying options. He knew what soda he liked, so that was easy even if he had to hold it awkwardly under his arm as he walked around the store. But the hamburger meat came with several different options of percent lean, and he wasn't sure how many pounds of tenderloin they needed. There was about a million different types of bread and buns.

Didn't everyone always say the Soviets were so unfree, they had no options in the grocery store? Maybe Johnny and his mom and Daniel should move, become commies. Anything to make this easier.

By the end of the ordeal, his basket was piled high. It wasn't too heavy for Johnny, but he hadn't considered the fact that it might strain the little wire handles.

“Y'know, we have carts,” said the pizza-faced boy at the checkout counter, watching Johnny struggle to pull stuff out of the Jenga stack in the basket. He couldn't get the handles down, and it was making it impossible to extract the larger bottles and boxes.

Johnny gave him a hard look. “Shouldn't you be in school?”

The boy gave him a funny look. “It's Saturday afternoon.”

“Sid came by earlier,” Johnny told Laura later the previous night, once she got home and poured herself a glass of wine and they ordered food.

She paused, eyes darkening. “You talked to him?” she asked sharply.

She looked relieved when Johnny shook his head, which made him feel weird. Like, how bad could it really be these days, him talking to Sid? They'd lived together for years after all. With the man out of sight and earshot, this whole thing felt stupid: the pool house, the game of hiding in the man's own backyard, the stress lines building around his mom's mouth.

“Maybe,” he said suddenly, sitting up straight in his chair. She looked at him questioningly. “Maybe I should talk to him? Tell him to back off, leave us alone. Maybe,” but she was shaking her head.

She reached across the table and took his hand, and he looked down. “Baby, I know this house isn't great, but I promise it's temporary.”

“It's not,” about that, he wanted to say. Because it wasn't. He didn't think. He said, “I just think maybe I should handle him.” Since it was kind of his fault.

“That's very sweet, but that's not how divorce works.” She shifted forward in her own chair and abandoned his hand to brush his hair back from his forehead. “Trust me, Johnny. There's nothing you can do.”

Johnny vs Hi Honey, How Was Your Day

Around seven, he headed over to the shop to pick up Daniel. The night before on the phone, he'd suggested grabbing dinner, and the other boy got halfway through musing about Johnny cooking up supper for *his hardworking man* before he audibly reconsidered the joke, likely picturing a headlock in his future. Daniel hastily changed the subject, but it was too late.

Anyway, ignoring the asshole joke, it was as good as an agreement. But Johnny wasn't going to cook for Daniel. (Johnny didn't know how to cook.)

He parked the Avanti behind the shop in the spot he was already kind of thinking as hers, and hopped out. The deck doors were unlocked, which made him shake his head as he slid them open.

“You know these are still open, right?” he called.

Daniel twisted around from the utility sink and eyed him. “Well, they are now, yeah.”

“Neighborhood like this, you should lock them,” and Johnny turned and did just that, though the latch left a lot to be desired. He scowled at it.

“I knew you were coming,” protested Daniel over his shoulder, continuing to scrub his hands. “And anyway, that lock's junk, it's like, the placebo of locks. But if it makes you feel better, go ahead. If someone really wants to get in, you realize they could just climb through one of the broken windows, right?”

“Jesus, *is* that supposed to make me feel better?” muttered Johnny, eyeing the large hole in the window behind Daniel. He looked around. “Your sensei already head home?”

“Yep, told him I'd clean up a bit and find my own way back later.”

Daniel finished rinsing his hands and reached for the hand towel draped on the table next to the sink. His head came back as Johnny stepped up behind him, hands wrapping around his hips. Daniel made an amused noise deep in his throat, and Johnny could feel the vibration of it under his lips. He kissed his neck again.

“Mm," said Daniel. "Much, much later, I think.”

“Yeah,” said Johnny, agreeing.

The day had been long and murderously boring. If he tried to cast his mind back on it to summarize what he did, he suspected it would sound even worse. But why would he do that when he was with Daniel? He had better things to occupy himself with now.

He pushed at the other boy to turn around and hiked him up on the table beside the sink – Daniel going along with it, even as he said:

“Hey, now, watch it. This is a serious place of business. Pretty sure there are laws or a code of ethics or something about using one's executive privileges for personal pleasure.”

Johnny pressed in close between his legs. “Executive privileges,” he repeated. “You mean, what – the key you have for that shitty door lock?"

Daniel grinned up at Johnny and wrapped an arm around his waist. “That's just the beginning. I'm thinking about getting business cards made next, and eventually putting a phone in? Maybe with my own personal extension, and if you grovel real pretty, I'll give you the number – but hey, like I said, this is a serious business, so no phone sex will be allowed on the company line.” He leaned forward and dug his chin into Johnny's chest. Smiled. “That will be reserved for the home phone.”

Johnny ducked down and kissed him briefly. “Nice try,” he said against his lips. “But we're still not having sex on the phone.” And he kissed him again before Daniel could voice his disappointment.

Across the room, the front door creaked open.

Overhead, the shop lights all went out.

Johnny vs Finding His Place on the Mat

Johnny jumped back and twisted around, but by the time he made the panicked mental switch from *did he see* to *wait, that's not Mr. Miyagi*, Daniel had already slipped off the table and stepped forward.

“C'mon guys,” he said, gesturing at the door impatiently. “This isn't funny anymore – c'mon turn on the lights.”

And kissing Daniel must make Johnny more stupid than usual, must slow him down, because he looked at the first two grinning punks and didn't get it, and then he looked at the tall one who came in last: walking like a fighter, eyes like a fighter, hair like Biff Tannen. And then Johnny got it.

“Hey Danny,” said one of the boys. He wore a necklace and looked like one of those Goomba things from the new Mario game. “Hope you got some good news for my friend Mike here.”

Daniel looked around at them fanning out. “I told you, I can't help you out. Forget about it, will you?” He sounded more irritated than surprised, and Johnny realized two very important things in quick succession:

One, Daniel had lied about who roughed him up, or at least omitted the part where it had been three-on-one, meaning there was a whole *gang* out there targeting him, and Johnny would think about that later because just then he was focused on the second thing:

This *Mike* was the guy who gave Daniel a black eye.

Johnny moved forward, shoving Daniel stumbling behind him so Mike had no choice but to look at him instead.

Mike looked. Mike sneered.

“Aw, who's this, Danny, your boyfriend?” asked Goomba.

“Yeah, that's right,” said Johnny, and he struck first, just like he'd been taught.

Johnny vs Finally

It felt so good to hit someone.

It felt right, like – *relief*.

Sid was a knuckle-popper, was always clasping and squeezing his own hands with unnatural force until they gave a terrible crack. When he was younger, and dumb, Johnny asked about it. Sid said something about pressure in the joints; cracking released the tension. (It always felt more like a transferral to Johnny, that sound snapping his attention to the man better than a horsewhip. This seemed to please Sid almost as much as the joint cracking.)

If popping knuckles felt anything like punching Mike, Johnny guessed he finally understood.

He got two blows in before the other fighter realized he was for real and blocked his next punch. Somewhere behind him, Daniel shouted his name, but he couldn't look around; you never take your eyes off the enemy, not for a second.

Blood dripped from Mike's nose. His face was tight and furious as he caught Johnny's fist and tried twisting it to gain control.

“I'm not even here for you,” he hissed into his face, and Johnny went cold all over.

He gave the other boy what he wanted and leaned into his pull, and down they both went to the hard wood floor.

He rolled and sprang back to his feet, but Mike was already up, quicker than he'd anticipated, and Johnny took a foot to the ribs. Stumbled; blocked the next kick but not the follow-up backhand, and what the fuck was that?

(This wasn't a tournament. This wasn't the dojo.)

(Johnny realized: he could do anything.)

(He could do *anything*.)

His split lip stretched into a hard grin. He grabbed the next foot that came for his head, knocked the other leg out from under Mike. The other boy hit the boards with a caught groan, twisting to get back up

but before he could manage it, Johnny raised his foot and stomped on his knee with everything he had.

Mike screamed.

Johnny vs Daniel's Pride

“Oh *fuck*,” said someone, and:

“Mike, let's go!”

Goomba raced forward, and tried hauling Mike up, with limited success. The boy slipped from his grasp. Mike's hand kept helplessly returning to clutch his knee, offering little assistance to the overall endeavor.

Johnny thought he could easily step forward then and plant a knee in Goomba's face, but instead he tipped his head in grim satisfaction and stood back to breathe.

My knee. Oh, fuck, my fucking knee.

The third boy limp-ran forward and got Mike's arm over his shoulder, and finally they were on the move. Johnny helped them along with a hard kick to the third boy's backside. He smirked as it sent them all stumbling like tipped dominoes.

Goomba looked back over their shoulders once as they reached the open front door. “This isn't over! We won't ever stop coming, Danny. You're going to sign that application.”

Daniel.

The cold focus of the fight evaporated in an instant. Johnny spun around; the shop behind him was a shambles of tossed tables and smashed paper dividers, a broken window. And in the middle of it all: Daniel, only just now pushing himself up from the floor. His dark head was bowed, hiding his face. He was quiet.

Johnny was at his side in an instant, and where the others had been graceless and rough in their handling of Mike, he was desperately careful. Thinking: what if something was broken? Was he bleeding?

He bent down and gathered Daniel up close until he could feel his heart pounding through his chest. He stood and his own heart squeezed at the familiar lightness of the other boy, the slender, vulnerable line of his body. He turned in place to get a look at him under the streetlight coming through the windows and—

“Treaty of Buffalo,” groaned Daniel, twisting his face away, like the

light was too much.

“Shut up,” said Johnny tensely. His grip on his body tightened reflexively. He was in no way prepared for Daniel to suddenly twist in the cradle and shove hard at his chest.

“I'm serious, Johnny,” he said. His tone was strange: deeply familiar and also – not. He was angry? “Put me down.”

And Johnny did, but only because he didn't know what else to do. The guilt was starting to flood in – he couldn't believe he left Daniel to face down two unknown fighters. What was he thinking?

“I'm sorry,” he began to say, but Daniel took two horrifically unsteady steps away and turned to him, eyes ablaze.

“What the hell was that? Why'd you do that?” he demanded.

“Mike looked like the dangerous one,” he said. It sounded inadequate to his own ears.

Daniel shook his head and threw out an arm. “That didn't have to be a fight!”

Johnny blinked. He couldn't help but glance around the shop. “Are you kidding?”

“I was handling it,” he bit out.

He had a large bruise rising on his jaw, and his left hand was holding his side. It was absurd. He was absurd.

“Yeah,” said Johnny, nodding, “yeah, I remember how you handled it last time – you got a black eye and the guys came back for more.” Even with the overhead lights off, he could see how Daniel's face darkened with an angry flush. He added hastily, “Look, I was just trying to protect you.”

“Protect—” Daniel laughed, and it wasn't a nice sound. “Is that what you thought that was?”

Johnny didn't know what to say. But this was Daniel, and he never needed Johnny to say anything to carry a conversation by himself.

“Well, I don't need your damn *protection*. Jesus, Johnny. I can take care of myself.”

“No, you can't,” he said, unthinking scorn coming out like it had never left, like it was last year and a twerp with no training thought he could take on Johnny.

Daniel's face went blank.

Johnny stared back at him, feeling sick.

He knew he'd fucked things up somehow, but he couldn't see it, couldn't figure it. In his head, it was simple. Undeniable. What he saw was the predictable through-line of the fight: a punch returned with a punch until the enemy stopped coming.

The enemy was gone. Daniel didn't seem to care.

Johnny vs Daniel's Temper

“You know,” said Daniel slowly, “sometimes I think you forget – I beat you last year. My leg was wrecked, and I still beat you.”

“I never forget,” he said.

Daniel nodded neatly. “Right, right. But it wasn't some kind of fluke. It wasn't just you – it was all your friends too. Me. By myself. With Mr. Miyagi's training, I can—”

“What did you expect me to do?” asked Johnny loudly, and maybe he was starting to get a little angry himself, because he didn't understand and he hated not understanding, he hated it. “When they came strolling in here, clearly looking for a fight? What was I supposed to do, Daniel?”

Daniel's eyes shut briefly. He pressed his mouth tight and shook his head. He turned in place, looking again at the mess. His hand flexed around his ribs, and Johnny wished he'd let him at least check him over.

His fists clenched at his sides. He stared at the back of his head and didn't move.

“How is this any different from that bar in North Texas?” he wanted to know, throat aching around the words. Because to Johnny, it was the exact same: it was Daniel, and it was him, and the other details might as well have been Mad Libbed for all they mattered.

Daniel wheeled back around, looking amazed. “It's completely different. We haven't been drinking, for one. We aren't far from home and surrounded by strangers, we're,” and his temper erupted out of a side vent or something, and Daniel turned and aimed a hard kick at wash pail lying on its side a foot away; it went flying into the wall with a loud clatter, “we're in *Mr. Miyagi's fucking shop*, which we're supposed to be fixing up. I mean – look at this place, Johnny! What am I supposed to say to him?”

“I don't know,” said Johnny.

Daniel put a hand to his forehead and bent over like he'd taken a hit to the gut, which he probably did. “Damn it,” he whispered at the floor. “*Damn it.*”

He stepped forward then, because he couldn't take this. “The damage is mostly superficial,” probably, “and that window needed to be replaced anyway.” Definitely. “Your sensei will understand.” Surely?

“He always understands,” said Daniel bitterly, still glaring at the floorboards. His jaw was tight, and it was like he couldn't bear to look at Johnny. “That's not the point.”

“Look, how are your ribs?”

Daniel seemed to realize he was still holding them and quickly dropped his hand.

"Fine,” he said shortly. He straightened up and took a small hitching breath that didn't escape Johnny's notice.

Daniel looked around the shop once more and carefully made his face go blank again. It was unsettling; if you'd asked Johnny, half an hour ago, he would've said Daniel couldn't conceal his emotions worth a damn.

“Can I drive you home?” he asked. He thought if Daniel insisted on doing something stupid like walking or calling a cab, he'd lose his mind.

But Daniel only said, “Yeah, might as well get it over with.”

He finally looked at Johnny again, and his eyes caught on something on his face. His expression flickered.

“You got a fat lip,” he said softly, reaching up to brush it: a distant pain Johnny paid no mind to. Daniel tipped his head and his eyes widened a fraction. “And your cheekbone's going to have a pretty nasty bruise.”

Johnny captured the hand at his mouth, feeling a little desperate; he probably squeezed the fingers a little too tight, but Daniel didn't even wince. Johnny didn't want to pull him in, because that might jostle something, so he stepped hesitantly forward. Telegraphing the move in case the other boy wanted to back away.

Daniel stepped into the embrace, though, ducking his head to press his forehead against his shoulder. Still hiding. But at least he was letting him touch him. Johnny wrapped his arms around his shoulders and tried not to focus on the tension singing through Daniel's body, the alien rigidity of the spine under his hands.

What about when they come back? he didn't ask. He didn't want to listen to Daniel's answer.

Daniel vs Johnny's Silence

It was quiet in the Avanti.

What about when they come back? was the question crashing around inside his head as they drove back to the dojo. Ordinarily he'd be voicing the question aloud, the way he voiced everything and yeah, he knew from all the teasing what Mr. Miyagi and Johnny and basically everyone who's ever known him thought about that, but the truth was, talking helped him think; helped him process. When you were talking you had to say things in a certain way and if the order was wrong, it became apparent real quick because it sounded funny, and that's how you knew there was a certain order not just to things, but the world, a baseline logic everything operated on. It was good sometimes to know that order existed, it was comforting, because otherwise what else was there but everywhere another fist flying towards your face, another boot coming down on your neck and you lying there on the ground stupidly wondering why, why, why.

He didn't say any of this. He didn't trust any response the other boy might make.

Johnny didn't get it. How could he? He was bigger than Daniel. Not actually *that* big, but yeah, bigger. And Daniel got the impression he'd been told plenty of shitty things by his asshole of a stepdad and his dead asshole of a sensei, but he's probably never been told he was too weak for a school; a town; a whole damn country. Too small and weak to make anything of himself – and if he tried, well, the rest of the world would come down real quick to disabuse him of any of those uppity notions.

Daniel took those two other guys on by himself: held his own and even got some good hits in, but what did it matter? Unless you're willing to maim someone, apparently it just didn't fucking count.

(He could still hear that Mike guy's scream.)

(He could see the relaxed, confident line of Johnny's turned back.)

(Johnny looked like that after doing a kata, too.)

Not for the first time, Daniel wondered what it was like to have people look at you and see a man: someone capable and strong, someone you could trust to handle things, whatever they are. Even Daniel's mom

didn't think he could take care of himself. Back in the old neighborhood, it could be suffocating; the one good thing about California, he remembered thinking, was that he'd at least be away from that machismo bullshit.

Well, he'd thought that night on the beach with Johnny last year, *the world might be bigger than Newark, but it was also just as goddamn small.*

Daniel noticed his hands were balled into tight fists in his lap and deliberately relaxed them. He stared hard out at the passing city lights, eyes burning.

He wanted to kick and claw his way out of his own damn body – or no, actually, because his body wasn't the problem. What he really wanted was a way out from this stupid world with its stupid rules and stupid, ugly, brutal people—

“Do you,” said Johnny suddenly, causing Daniel to almost jump in his seat. He didn't, but the pain in his ribs flared alive again as he tensed up.

Johnny didn't notice. He was staring straight ahead at the road, his hands flexing over the steering wheel. He continued, “Do you think we should – talk about it?”

Somewhere very far away, Daniel recognized this for what it was: Johnny trying. But he couldn't reach the part of himself that cared. There was a problem with the line. Try again later.

“I'm not really in the mood to talk,” said Daniel, and that was all it took to shut Johnny up for the rest of the drive.

He always knew it wouldn't be hard.

Daniel vs Miyagi's Nightmare

He could tell something was wrong as soon as the Avanti's headlights washed over the front lot. He was out of the car before it came to a stop, ignoring Johnny's *Jesus, Daniel!* in favor of running over to Mr. Miyagi.

He was trying to right one of the tables he'd put outside the garage to sort his old bonsai stock from the South Seas. At Daniel's approach, his sharp eyes came up and zeroed in immediately to the hand he was holding against his ribs. Daniel dropped the hand almost as quickly.

“What happened?” they asked each other; Daniel beat him to the end of the sentence, because even on a good day he spoke fast, and that day hadn't been a good day.

Mr. Miyagi waited. Daniel supposed it was below the man's dignity to say *you first*; it wasn't below his, but there was no way he could out-stubborn Mr. Miyagi.

“Some guys came by the shop as I was cleaning up,” he said quickly. “Same as before, going on about the damn application for the tournament. They – Johnny, he.” He changed his mind, shook his head. “The place is a little trashed. Broke a window, couple of the shoji. I'm sorry, Mr. Miyagi, really, if it wasn't for – what are you, oh,” he said, as the man reached over to check his ribs, “I'm fine, it's just bruises, promise. But never mind that, what happened here?”

Mr. Miyagi ignored his attempts to wave off the check-up, fingers probing the tender bone carefully. His words came frustratingly slowly, his gaze intent on his task: “Had visit. Boys try to take bonsai. Miyagi stop them. All – okay.”

The idea that Mike and his friends would go so far as to mess with Mr. Miyagi's house made Daniel almost dizzy with anger. But before he could ask what, precisely*, okay* meant – because his friend liked to downplay a lot of things – most things, in fact – Johnny spoke up behind him.

“Those guys came here?”

Miyagi nodded and, apparently satisfied that Daniel's ribs weren't about to detach and float away, dropped his arms. He stepped back.

“What kind of car were they driving, did you see?”

“*Seriously*, Johnny?” Daniel twisted to give him a disbelieving glare, and Johnny stared back, confused for a second before rolling his eyes impatiently.

His mouth flattened. “I *mean*, so you'd have a description to report to the police, dumbass.”

Cops. Cops?

“Cops!” said Daniel, looking back to Mr. Miyagi. “We should report this to the cops. I mean, you can't just go around beating people up and vandalizing their shops, trying to steal their stuff. That's illegal. Maybe the cops can do something, find them, stop all this.”

The idea of anyone being able to step in and stop the craziness felt almost too good to be true, but it had to be true, right? That's why they were there, to stop things like this, surely. A man couldn't tend to something for years and years, building up a whole lifetime of expertise and care, a whole shop worth of beautiful, delicate living things, only to have the whole plan ruined by a couple jackasses with stupid haircuts and bad attitudes.

Right?

But Mr. Miyagi turned away and resumed setting his table to rights, looking supremely disinterested. “Miyagi not mess with police.”

“*What*? Why the hell not?”

“Daniel,” muttered Johnny behind him; he ignored him.

“Well, what are you gonna do?" he demanded. "Mr. Miyagi, what if those guys come back? We're not always going to be here to protect the trees, and the shop – the shop's security is a joke! So what's your plan?”

Miyagi carefully tipped a pine tree back onto its base from its side; it was one of the newer bonsai, lanky and sparse, and half the soil had been dumped from its pot.

“Plan – tend bonsai,” said Mr. Miyagi, nodding over the tree. “Tomorrow, find business insurance.”

Daniel stared. His knee flexed in its socket. He waited to see if by

some miracle there was more to this incredibly passive-sounding plan. Surely Mr. Miyagi's plan wasn't to just wait these guys out. When it became clear that was exactly what he intended to do, Daniel threw his hands in the air and spun in place. He stalked past Johnny, heading for the Ford.

“Where are you going?” called Johnny, glancing between him and Mr. Miyagi.

“I'm going to talk to the damn cops,” shouted Daniel, slamming the Ford's door.

Johnny was at the car's side in an instant, hands wrapping over the top of the door to stop him from taking off. He stared down at him, eyes dark and serious. “Well – do you want me to come with you?”

Was he more or less likely to be taken seriously if Johnny came with him? After a moment, Daniel shook his head. “No, just – go home.” He glanced up at the other boy's pale face and paused, eyes slamming shut against what he saw there.

This was Johnny, he thought at himself carefully. The same guy who blushed when Daniel stripped off his shirt and who liked to hold hands when watching movies. He wasn't the enemy.

He turned his head and took a careful breath. When he opened his eyes again, he saw Mr. Miyagi over the curve of his steering wheel. The man hadn't moved from beside the garage and was watching them. Daniel had no idea what he was thinking, but he knew one thing: he couldn't be happy.

“Go home, Johnny,” he said again, quietly. “Everything's fine. Look, I'll – I'll call you tomorrow, alright?”

After a couple seconds, Johnny stepped back from the door. It was the only reply he made.

Daniel vs Cops

The cops do not take him seriously. They basically laugh him out of the station.

The building was full of broad, dark-clad bodies with slow, swaggering gaits, heavy belts. Every new pair of eyes seemed to perform the same quick bob, giving him an unsubtle once-over followed by a poorly concealed grin. Daniel didn't know what they found funniest: the way he looked, the way he sounded, or that apparent pinnacle of punchlines: the words *bonsai shop*.

“And your partner,” said the sergeant, glancing down at the report. “This Miyagee fellow—”

“Miyagi,” said Daniel. The florescent lights in the station hurt his tired eyes; he'd waited almost two hours to speak to someone.

“Right. He here with you?”

Daniel stared. He wanted to look around, to emphasize the pointlessness of the question. Was Mr. Miyagi here? Yeah, sure, he was over in the bathroom, sir, why don't we wait another hour.

“No,” he said, after a moment.

The sergeant nodded. He sure did a lot of nodding. He flipped the report closed and sniffed, glanced around. Daniel found himself staring at a spot on his chin the man had missed shaving. “Well, y'know, these things... they can be hard to track without any identifying information,” the man explained. “Kids, you know? These random acts of vandalism—”

“It's not random,” said Daniel quietly. His jaw ached badly: from the bruise; from clenching his teeth. “I told the other guy, I explained – the application for the tournament?”

“The... youth karate tournament, right, right,” said the man. He licked his lips and looked again at the report, reading with a slight squint. “There any money in that?” he asked.

Daniel gritted his teeth again, and pain crawled up the side of his face.

“Not that I am aware of,” he said, as evenly as he could manage. The sergeant paused and he added, a little defeated, “Look, I think it's

weird too, okay.”

“Well, son, we'll look into it,” says the sergeant, looking up with a blank smile.

His pale, watery eyes looked right through Daniel, like he was nothing more than empty air.

Daniel vs Unexpected Heat

“And then, y'know, he just. It was like the guy looked right through me,” finished Daniel, flipping his hands over the table. “Long story, short – I don't think they're gonna do anything to help.”

“Short?” said Terry.

Daniel recognized the tone. He shrugged and tried to smile, feeling a little sheepish. He might have rambled a little longer than he'd intended. But the man had asked, and context was kind of important here. He didn't want the guy to react like the cops had.

“Don't worry about it,” said Terry. “Sounds like you had to get it off your chest or it was going to choke you. I know how that feels.”

They were sitting in a booth in a little Mexican restaurant a few blocks away from the hardware store they'd bumped into each other a few days ago. It was late morning, just at the start of the lunch rush, and the place was doing a brisk business.

“It's just, it's like no one else in the universe seems to see the problem,” said Daniel. He looked down at the colorful tabletop. “Not Johnny, not Mr. Miyagi, not the *cops*. I don't know what to do.”

Terry nodded, folding his arms on the table. His gaze was sharp and sympathetic. “I'm not surprised the police were no help. They don't sit up and pay attention unless you have deep pockets. They know who signs the checks.”

Daniel paused. “The taxpayers?”

Terry laughed a little, but not like he was making fun of him, exactly. More like he thought he was naive.

Daniel sighed and rubbed his neck. “Right. Great.”

“Way of the world, Daniel. It is what it is.”

“Well, how it is sucks,” he said flatly.

Terry toasted that statement ironically with his water and drank, long neck flexing as he swallowed. His hands looked huge wrapped around the glass. Bet he had no problem getting people to see him properly, thought Daniel absently.

Their food arrived and the next few minutes were spent unwrapping forks and shuffling in their seats, digging into the food. Daniel never actually got dinner the night before, because his date with Johnny had been cut short, and when he woke up that morning, his stomach was twisting in on itself too much to make breakfast seem appealing. He was starving.

“What's bugging you the most?” asked Terry, spearing a piece of his carne asada. He sat forward to stare at him frankly, and for a moment it was like he took up more than just the other side of the booth, his shoulders were so big. He had startlingly clear eyes. “Is it that they might come back?”

Daniel blinked and narrowed his eyes off to the side, out the window. “Yeah, I mean – that's part of it, for sure.”

“But not why you decided to dig that number out and give me a call,” guessed Terry.

He shrugged again, awkward. He didn't know how to broach the subject. It still felt a little dumb, coming to a stranger like this, but that morning he hadn't known what else to do. He didn't want to talk to Mr. Miyagi about it – how would that look, the first he's hearing about Daniel and Johnny's relationship, and it's with the context of him worrying about the other boy's fighting? Talk about bad impressions.

He gathered his taco together and bit off half of it in one go. After a couple seconds, his eyebrows shot up.

“What's wrong, too spicy?” asked Terry, noticing his expression. He noticed a lot of things, nothing got past this guy. “I'm sorry, when I ordered I thought you said—”

“It's fine,” said Daniel quickly around the food, reaching for his water. He swallowed hard and took a sip. Waved the concern off. “I like spicy food. Seriously, I order it all the time.”

“Okay,” he said, bemused.

“It's Johnny,” he blurted out.

“Your boyfriend.”

“...Yeah. He – he does karate too, y'know. And I think, if those guys keep coming around, he's gonna keep fighting them. But last night,

that guy he fought – I must've called three different hospitals, trying to check in and see if he was okay, but nobody knew anything about a kid with a knee injury. Or if they did, they weren't talking. Not to me."

Daniel took another bite and chewed, forcing himself to keep a straight face. His lips tingled when he licked them, but he couldn't seem to stop. Should he have ordered milk or something?

"It was good of you to check. You're a good man, Daniel."

"Johnny is too," he said, realizing how all this must sound.

"I'm sure he is," came the easy reply.

"It was the way he was trained," he tried to explain. "He's a good person, really, but he's just. He's got this—"

"Killer instinct," said Terry. He wasn't looking at Daniel anymore. It was his turn to stare out the window. In the midday light, Daniel could see the faint signs of hardness in his face.

"Yeah," he said, the heat on his tongue making the words feel parched like the desert. "Maybe."

"You know," said the other man slowly, "the worst thing my man ever did – I mean the worst thing he did in his whole life – he did for me. It should've been me, but." He shook his head. "I wasn't strong enough."

It was completely disarming, a guy who looked like this, admitting he hadn't been strong enough for something.

"How," started Daniel, momentarily forgetting the food, "how bad we talking?"

Terry's mouth twisted into a hard not-smile. His eyes returned to Daniel's briefly and he shrugged those large shoulders. "About as bad it gets?"

Daniel wondered if this was a war thing. Mr. Miyagi never talked about his time in the war, not even to talk about how he got the medals.

"He shouldered that burden for me," continued Terry quietly. "And it was like no matter what I did after – it was never enough. The scales only tip so far, you know?"

Daniel didn't know, but he was captivated by the sadness in his voice, the regret in his eyes. He was suddenly very conscious of how little he'd lived, how little he knew of the world. Had Terry been his age when he went to war? Daniel could only shake his head slightly. In response, Terry shoved his plate away and leaned all the way forward over the table, like he was telling Daniel something vital.

His eyes held him as he said urgently, “You have to let them know you're okay, that you can handle yourself. Otherwise, he might get lost. You see?”

“I think so,” said Daniel, and his voice was almost a whisper, because that was what Terry's intensity bid.

“Sometimes when he looked at me, and it didn't matter if it was years later – I swear he was seeing that night all over again. You don't want that, Daniel. Trust me.”

“So what do I do?” he asked. Distantly, he was aware his stomach was starting to cramp from the spiciness of the food, but he couldn't move a single muscle, not with the man looking at him like that.

Terry finally looked away and sat back, releasing him for the moment. Daniel still didn't move, feeling a little shaken.

“I don't know what to tell you,” he said, shaking his head. “I wish I did.... These boys, they were after – what, again?”

“They want me to fight in the All-Valley,” he said, and it sounded so incredibly *stupid* now, so small. Like nothing at all. “Johnny and Mr. Miyagi don't want me to, which – I don't really get. I mean, I'd only have to fight in the final. It's just one match. And I've had a whole more year of training. I think, I think I'm good.”

Terry's eyebrows rose in slight surprise. “From what I've heard, you're not just good, Daniel. Remember – you're the champion.”

Johnny vs Crucial Insights

“I don't know, man,” said Dutch, punching. “Sounds like you did what you had to do. Don't know what LaRusso's got his panties in a twist about.”

Johnny held the bag steady. He was already kind of regretting this. Maybe he should've gone to Bobby instead? But Bobby had class and Dutch was apparently into boys. Johnny was beginning to suspect there were other qualifications necessary for giving out advice than just liking dick sometimes. This was so stupid.

“Daniel doesn't wear panties,” he muttered, and immediately winced and looked around.

Dutch's preferred gym was all worn mats and hard cement, harder bodies. Everyone else was older than them. More built. It was a boxer's place, mainly, and it wasn't that Johnny didn't think he couldn't take anyone in here, but he didn't want to show up with fresh bruises and have to explain that to Daniel. After the night before, it would look –

It wouldn't look good.

Dutch looked at him around the heavy bag. “Has he tried? I knew this guy, last May,” and he gave a long, low whistle. Shook his head. “It was pretty fuckin' hot.”

Johnny had a powerful desire to knock him on his ass. “You know, he beat you last year,” he said, because explaining how the other boy would likely react to Johnny suggesting he wear girl's underwear was so horrific a prospect, he nearly let go of the bag to cover his face. God, Daniel would dump him on the spot. He might even go after the Avanti, and who could blame him. It was just, like. Panties?

“Yeah – he got the points, I got his ribs,” said Dutch; he noticed his warning expression and shook his head. “Anyway, what's that got to do with anything?”

“I was kind of hoping for some more insight here,” said Johnny. This had been such a mistake. “About something other than Daniel's underwear, thanks.”

Dutch pounded the bag rapidly: one two-three. He rolled his

shoulders. “Man, you walk in here looking all sad and pathetic, you tell me you kicked ass last night, and that your little girlfriend got pissy about it. What am I supposed to say, exactly?”

“I don't know.” Johnny didn't know anything, except he'd felt sick all morning. Skin too tight, stomach roiling. He felt like he should be pacing.

(This was a lie; he felt like he should be fighting. But there were no enemies here. Just himself.)

He'd called Mr. Miyagi's house first thing and no one had picked up. After arriving at the gym, he'd called home to see if Daniel had called, and had to stand there and listen to his mom modulate her concern and sympathy over the line as she told him *no, I'm sorry.* Johnny thought about the look on Daniel's face last night and said only *okay*.

“Way I see it, it's pretty simple,” said Dutch, twisting his hips to switch it up, hit the bag with a solid roundhouse. He huffed and reset, did it again. “You're either strong enough to handle things yourself, or you get out of the way of those who are. Sooner LaRusso admits that to himself, the better off he'll be.”

And it wasn't that Johnny exactly disagreed, but there was something about the way Dutch said it that sat uneasily with him. He would've said it different, he thought. Or something.

“I don't get the big deal here,” continued Dutch. “I mean – he's got you, right?”

“Yeah,” said Johnny, shifting behind the bag. He looked down. “Yeah, he's got me.”

Johnny vs Backsliding

"This is stupid," said Dutch eventually, after he'd worked up a decent sweat. He executed a kick in Johnny's direction, which he automatically blocked.

"What's stupid?"

"You, standing there like that. You're kinda bringing the mood down. Are we sparring or what?"

Johnny looked down at his hands, flexing his fingers. His knuckles on his left hand were a little scuffed from the night before, but otherwise they bore no sign that he'd fought at all. If he avoided looking in the mirror, he could almost forget. But only almost, because Daniel wasn't here, wasn't talking to him.

He had nothing else to do that day, and he promised he wouldn't take off in the car anymore. What else was there?

"Yeah, okay," said Johnny, and he stripped off his plaid, threw it aside. "Let's go."

Johnny vs Dutch

Johnny hit Dutch, and he didn't think twice about the pain, because he never thought about the pain when he was fighting one of the guys. He felt the solid muscle of the other boy's arm absorb the shock of his blow, and he saw the grimace on his face, and he only thought what he always thought, which was: that was a good hit; okay, next.

Dutch disengaged and rolled his neck. He tested his jaw and grinned mean at him. “Think you're a little rusty. All that cuddling with LaRusso make you soft or something?”

Dutch and Bobby, they never shut up while sparring. He could never figure out if it was supposed to be a distraction tactic or what. In tournaments, it could be useful as an intimidation thing, which he guessed is why Sensei never trained them out of the habit.

Johnny didn't say anything back. He never talked while fighting. Anything he had to say, he figured he could say best with his fists.

He proceeded to tell Dutch how soft he'd gotten.

Johnny vs Mistaken Identity

The sweat from the fight had long since dried on his skin when he drove over to the tree shop.

(He tried one last time time with the phone at the boxing gym, but it was the middle of the day and no one was home: not at Mr. Miyagi's place nor the pool house. So he figured he had two options: go wait by the phone in the pool house and completely lose his mind, or swing by the tree shop to check on things.)

He parked on the street outside and stared up at the shop. It looked closed. He got out of the Avanti and jogged up to try the door. Locked. He thought about checking round the back, but wasn't sure if that was a good idea, after everything. This left him standing on the steps, completely stymied.

They didn't seem to be around anyway.

He turned around and stopped quickly on the edge of the top step, because there was a girl standing below him on the sidewalk. Red head, weird clothes. She had her arms folded tightly over her chest and was looking up at him with a suspicious expression. What the hell?

“What?” he asked.

“Can I help you?” she said pointedly.

“Doubt it.” He gave her a wide berth as he head back to his car, meeting her narrow expression with a sidelong confused one of his own. She turned in place, like she was seeing him off. Okay, no, what the hell. He stopped by the driver's door but didn't get in. “*What.*”

“Come back for more?” she said. And when he only stared, she said, “I was working late last night across the street. You and your buddies didn't cause enough trouble? You think you can mess with their shop while they're not here, you're wrong. I'll call the cops.”

Johnny was so confused. He shifted back on his feet and looked around the street, finally spotting the pottery studio.

He looked back at her, realizing. “Oh, you the pottery chick?” Daniel had mentioned her name. Started with an A? Or a J? He hadn't said

anything about her being super weird, though. Pretty sure.

“Why, you planning to hit our place next?” she shot back without missing a beat.

“Oh my god, I'm a friend of Daniel's,” he said. “Jesus. I was here last night too – I was on his side. What the hell is this, get off my back!”

She took a step closer to the Avanti and leaned forward, arms still crossed. “You expect me to believe that?”

Did he seriously look that much like bad news? “Yeah, why not?”

“All I know is, I heard a lot of shouting on the street, and then I saw a car peel off with a bunch guys inside it. *This* car.”

Johnny stared wildly down at the Avanti. Then he figured it out. “Wait, a red convertible? Those guys were driving a red convertible?” And when her expression finally shifted and she nodded warily, he pressed, “And it was an Avanti?” No way were those losers driving around in an Avanti. Even if they had the money, they hadn't the taste.

“I don't know what that is.”

He threw his arms out from his sides. “Well, it's *this*. And I'm telling you, no way were those guys driving an Avanti convertible. This one is a prototype, very rare. They only just started putting the actual model on the market. Look, the one you saw, what did the headlights look like? Were they round or rectangular?”

“Wait, what's your name?” she asked suddenly. “Are you – oh,” and she abruptly relaxed. She was a lot prettier when she laughed. “You're Johnny, aren't you.”

Jessica & Reading Between the Lines

The boy startled at the name, straightening up abruptly like she was a gym teacher who'd barked it. He shook his surprise off and tried, poorly, to assume a more casual stance, hand landing atop the windshield of his convertible, excuse her, *the avanti*.

“So you've talked to Daniel?” he asked, and if he realized that was a tell, he didn't show it. He tapped the metal trim of the car door. “What, uh.” He shifted his weight, cocking his hip. His eyes met hers and flicked away. “What'd he say about me?”

Jessica didn't think she had time for that, because really, what didn't he say. She'd known Daniel for only a few days, and he already greeted her like they were old friends. It was really nice. Super weird, but nice.

“He said he had a friend helping out with the shop, and that he was very... particular about his car.”

If there was anything more embarrassing than a guy being in love with his car, it was his friend sounding like he was in love with a guy being in love with his car. Like, the concept of it. She thought maybe it was a boy thing, like how in her high school all the guys would flock around someone's new set of wheels and ladle on the praise. Jessica has partook in more than one obligatory cooing over another girl's new earrings, so she guessed she could understand it. Sorta.

Johnny shrugged and nodded and sort of narrowed his eyes like he was thinking really hard. But he didn't say anything.

“He seemed to really like you,” she said, after a moment, because if there was one thing she learned about Daniel within the first few hours of knowing him, it was that he was very eager to talk up the people he liked. His business partner was *the best*, a genius, so kind and giving; his friend was the coolest guy in the world, really sweet, and you should see his high kick.

“Yeah, we're real good friends,” he said abruptly, super fast. He nodded at the shop at her back. “So listen, they been around at all today?”

“They were cleaning up when I got in this morning, but I think they left around noon.” She looked again at the raised ruby red scrape on

his cheekbone. “So you fight those guys last night?”

Johnny blinked and looked down. Shifted on his feet again. “Yeah.”

“Daniel said you guys do karate, for defense – guess it's good to keep in practice, huh?” She wondered if she could convince them to show her some moves; she was always up for learning a new sport.

“Yeah,” is all he said, again.

Riiiight. Okay, then. She widened her eyes and tried not to fidget; he rubbed the back of his neck.

“I should probably get back to work,” she said finally.

“Did,” he said, and she paused and looked back at him. He was staring down at his car, but not like he was seeing it. His mouth was a thin down-turned slash. “Did they say if they'd be back, did it look like – do you know if they'll be back here today?”

He was upset, she realized. Daniel had been upset too, that morning; his expression like night and day from his usual bright smile. She wondered why they acted like they were in the middle of a fight with each other if they were on the same side.

“I don't know,” she said. “Sorry.”

Johnny nodded. Without looking at her again, he got back into his car and drove off. She stood for a few seconds on the street, peering after the red car and deciding her initial assumption had been totally reasonable; it really did look a lot like the one the other guys drove the night before.

Johnny vs Waiting

The drive over was good. Better than good: it was the middle of the day, so traffic was nothing he couldn't handle with some absent speeding and lane changes, and the weather was perfect. He almost didn't want it to end; so long as he was driving, nothing could touch him. All his problems, just a blur at his back. Except that meant—

Anyway.

He drove and he dealt with the annoying campus parking situation, and then he sat down outside Bobby's dorm room and waited.

Waiting was the opposite of driving.

The door opposite Bobby belong to *Jason* and *Zack*. Jason liked basketball and ZZ Top. Zack was more of a blank slate; literally, the white board under his name was blank.

He wondered if it felt weird, living with another boy all the time.

Someone lit up a joint in a nearby room. Johnny rolled his head against the wall and looked down the long, narrow hallway. He breathed in the smell. He thought vaguely about going to ask if he could have a hit, but he wasn't really in the mood to talk, and anyway, that wouldn't help anything. Though he might change his mind if Bobby didn't get there soon.

He should've brought more tapes from his car.

He was tracing the individual strands of fiber in the short carpet, noticing they were slightly different colors, when a pair of sneakers interrupted his eye line. He looked up, blinking.

Bobby leaned back from the wall and tilted his head to study his face with sharp eyes. Johnny shrugged a little, twitched his mouth a little impatiently.

“How long you been waiting?” is all Bobby asked.

Ages. “Not long. Where you been? Thought your classes were out after four?”

“Grabbed a bite to eat.”

Bobby stepped past him, digging his key out of his pocket. Johnny pushed up from the floor.

Over his shoulder as he unlocked the door, Bobby said, conversational, “Dutch called. What happened?”

“Dutch called but didn't say?” he asked, stepping inside after him. He wasted no time flopping down on Bobby's bed. A few seconds later, a beer was tossed his way and he caught it one-handed.

“Your typical... loquaciousness filtered through Dutch's middle school emotions, yeah, I really got a read on the situation. Think I feel more confused than ever.”

Context was Johnny's friend in moments like these. Bobby had done real well on the SATs.

“It's actually just that kind of story,” he said. “I mean – I'm confused.” He tapped the top of his can and cracked it. Took a drink before lowering the beer again and saying, “There's something weird happening with the All Valley.”

Johnny vs Details, Take Two

“Okay, Johnny,” said Bobby, leaning forward in his desk chair. “I want you think: details. Details, man.”

He nodded and thought about it. “Okay. So – we're in the shop—”

“What shop?” asked Bobby immediately.

He threw his head back and groaned. “Oh jesus, does it matter?”

“You never know. What shop?” he asked again, patient.

“They're started this,” *bonsai* he heard in his head, but he couldn't be sure if it was the right one, “tree shop, like these little... trees.”

“You mean, like bonsai?”

“Man, I really hate you sometimes,” said Johnny; Bobby shrugged. “Yeah, exactly like that. It was his idea, surprised his sensei with the lease. Building's a dump. Right next to some train tracks. Shitty neighborhood. But his sensei seemed into it, so I don't know.” He paused and widened his eyes at Bobby. “That enough detail for you?”

“For now. Continue.”

Johnny looked at the floor. He took another drink and said, “So it's dark, after closing, and these three guys walk in....”

After, he said, “So, it's weird, right? Something's not right here.”

Bobby's eyebrows were pinched in thought. “Sure, but – do you think it's even an issue anymore? You said you took out this Mike guy's knee.” And his tone was perfectly neutral, which bothered Johnny. Dutch had smirked and nodded, meanwhile Bobby acted like he had a problem but it wasn't worth getting into.

“You know how injuries go,” he said, uneasy. “Something can look real bad and you're back on your feet in a week or two. Others start small and you're fucked for months.”

Bobby nodded. “True.”

“Not the point anyway.”

“I agree.”

“Yeah. So what do you think?”

“Well – there's one thing I don't get.”

“Just the one?” Because Johnny didn't get *any* of it.

That Mike guy hadn't been local; Johnny has fought in all the tournaments in Los Angeles County, and a few of the bigger ones across the southern part of the state. He would've remembered seeing him. So what did a newcomer who was about to age out of the bracket from the looks of him want with an All Valley title that didn't even come with prize money? He couldn't figure it. Not even Daniel is that annoying.

“Yeah,” Bobby said, “like – where's Daniel in all this?”

His hand tightened around the can. “Dead center.”

“No, I mean – Johnny, you haven't mentioned him once.”

Johnny vs Simple

“So?” said Johnny.

“*So*, it feels like there's something missing from this picture.”

“Nothing's missing. I don't know what you mean. I mean, there's nothing to say.”

“Nothing to say.” And when Johnny, not even trying to make a point of it but yeah, kept his word by saying nothing more, Bobby sighed and asked, “Okay. So what does Daniel think is going on?”

“I don't know.”

Daniel hadn't called last night. Johnny had no idea what the cops said; maybe everything was fixed now. Except probably not, because Daniel hadn't called last night.

Johnny said, a little bitter, “He wasn't surprised when the guys came in. They'd messed with him before.”

“But you say he didn't know them?” asked Bobby. It was the second or third time he'd checked, like he thought he could surprise Johnny into giving some other answer, into making the world be different than it was. As if Johnny had that kind of power.

He shook his head. He tried to take another drink, but his can was empty.

Johnny didn't want to think about this. If he knew what Daniel thought was going on, that would be because he was with Daniel, and he wasn't, so what was the point in speculating?

Bobby watched him impassively. He shifted forward in his desk chair to knock open the door to his minifridge and grabbed another beer. He passed the can to Johnny, who accepted it with a nod of thanks.

“Dutch said Daniel was upset about you fighting,” said Bobby, making Johnny think the beer had been some kind of trick.

“Those the exact words he used?” he asked.

“Take a guess.”

Johnny elected not to; he took a drink instead. He lowered the can and said, “Yeah, he was kinda pissed. Guess he thought he could take them all on by himself or something. And he was mad about the shop getting trashed.”

“How did you feel? About the fight, I mean?”

Johnny shrugged. “I mean, I won.” Bobby paused, face doing something complicated. “What?”

The other boy set his own beer down on the desk and rubbed his face. “I don't know, man. I don't know.”

“Seriously, Bobby. *What.*”

The hands dropped. “Did you win, Johnny? I mean – it wasn't really a *match*, man. What does that even mean, you won?”

“It means I was the one standing in the end.” What the hell was this? “What the hell is this? First Daniel, now you. The guy wasn't gonna stop, man. He was gonna keep coming, and I figured, if I could do something about it, why wouldn't I? Isn't that what we were taught?”

“Exactly.”

“But he *deserved* it,” said Johnny. It was so simple. Why didn't everyone get how simple it was?

Bobby didn't look like he knew what to say. After a long moment of opening and closing his mouth a few times, he shook his head and let the subject drop. His brow was pinched in thought.

Johnny sat back and finished his drink. He could feel his face was flushed. The uneasy feeling was back; he wondered if Bobby would be willing to spar a little outside on the lawn.

“Mike was his name, you said,” said Bobby abruptly. And when Johnny nodded: “But you don't know his last name?”

He said, grudging, “Nope. And they were driving a red convertible, but I don't know anything more than that.”

Bobby nodded and straightened up in his seat. “Okay, well – let's call the All Valley. Ask for a list of fighters registered for the tournament next month. How many Mikes can there be?”

Johnny blinked, mood shifting and lightening because suddenly they

had a glimmer of a plan. All talk and bullshit feelings about whether he should've fought or whatever disappeared.

“Dude," he said. "You're a genius.”

Johnny vs Five Names

Bobby hung up his phone with finality. He shoved his notebook over a few inches to the edge of his desk and the two of them leaned forward together to study the list.

Five names: Michael Roberts, Mike Reid, Mike Torres, Michael Barnes, and Mike Weddle.

“No addresses?” asked Johnny, with little hope.

“No addresses,” said Bobby grimly. “No way they'd give those out. And we can look up the family names in the phonebook, but – that's going to take some work. Time. The number of families in the valley alone.... And I kind of have classes, man.”

"Yeah, okay, but isn't there some office we could just break into, get the addresses from?”

Bobby flattened his hand on the notebook and gave him a look; Johnny stared back, unblinking.

“I am not,” said Bobby after a seriously awkward showdown, “going to risk a rap sheet for *this*.”

“Whatever,” muttered Johnny, tipping his head back to finish his fifth beer.

In the evening, the sun having set, Bobby followed him out of the dormitory all the way to his car. He acted normal enough but once Johnny opened the Avanti's door, he said abruptly:

“Hey, you know, Johnny. Do you remember – junior year, art class. You were really good at sketching?”

He squinted at him over the car. Bobby looked back at him, face half-caught in an uncertain grimace. Johnny didn't quite understand what he was being accused of – like, Bobby already knew he liked boys sometimes. So what the hell.

“Yeah,” he said. He thought about it. “Wait, are you saying I should sketch the dude's face for you? I mean. I'm kinda out of practice, man.”

“No,” said Bobby after a second. “That's not – no.”

“Alright,” he said.

It was a weird moment.

He had a list of names. He had a freeway emptying out before him, all the usual messiness of other people rendered into discrete pinpricks of headlights; he had the faintly weightless feeling in his arms and legs that came from having a few; he had a plan.

He was also going over forty.

Johnny vs No Going Back

Johnny parked the Avanti in her normal spot and jogged the rest of the way home, trying to use up some of his excess energy. It didn't seem to work; the closer he got to the house, the stranger he felt. He didn't understand it. He had plan now, a road forward. So why did he feel like he was about to walk off a cliff?

He forgot his walkmen in the car, so all he could focus on was the sound of his steps on the pavement. Dull, short slapping; the rough whisper of his jeans; the unreadable steadiness of his practiced breathing.

The street rose and curled, and he put his head back, adjusted his stride. He passed familiar gates and large, concealing trees, counted the houses with lights on and held his breath whenever he passed one with no lights. His breathing punched up out of his chest more sharply afterwards, but only for a few seconds. He'd trained too many years to lose control for long.

He only had to dodge a car once; its headlights swept around a bend before the tell-tale creak of its tires. For one engine-idling humming second his own shadow was thrown up on a high garden wall dead ahead: a dark figure eight, ten feet tall and moving fast, faster than a jog. Then he went right and the car went left, and the shadow sprinter bent and warped, rejoining the night.

His pace slowed as he reached Sid's house, and then he abruptly stopped in front of the drive. He stood out on the dark street and looked up at the array of lit windows: a bright, large house completely devoid of life. If Sid was home, he was probably alone.

And if Johnny was different than he was, or if he had never been discovered and kicked out, he might still be up there on a night like tonight. He'd be in his old room, kicked back on his massive bed listening to his music, and what would he be doing? What would he be thinking about? Would he even know what he was missing, or would he not realize it; Johnny could all too easily imagine a version of himself that hid in that room forever and assumed that's all life was supposed to be. He hadn't the imagination to make up the whole new world of the past few months.

There was no going back to not knowing. But as he stood there, pulse relentlessly sinking back to resting rate, he finally let himself think of

a future in which he has nothing: not the room or all the shit inside; not the person he thought he was a year ago or the new person he'd thought he could be, maybe, with Daniel.

He told himself he wasn't going to let that happen, but he didn't know what fighting for it looked like, not if fighting for it meant fighting Daniel.

Johnny vs Trials

Johnny put his head down and walked up the lawn past the big house. He went to the back and let himself into the pool house, which unlike the other building was mostly dark but not empty.

His mom was seated at the small table in the kitchenette. The short floor lamp in the corner doused her in yellow, something about it turning her long, loose hair limp, her glass of white wine a more sickly hue.

She looked up as he came in and offered him a small smile, and she looked exhausted. Then she blinked and looked at him more closely.

“What's wrong?” they asked each other, words overlapping perfectly, slowly, like neither of them were eager to reach the end and have to find out.

Johnny waited and his mom sighed; it wasn't out of character for her to demand *you first*, but there was no way she could out-silence Johnny. Not when he felt like this.

She smiled again, worse, and looked down. She pushed her wine glass away a couple inches and said carefully, “Johnny, we might be going to court.”

“Court,” he said. “Like – a trial?”

She nodded. “Mediation hasn't been working. It's not a sure thing yet, but Leonard thinks – he thinks that's what they've been angling for all along.”

He sank into a chair. “What does that mean? What's a trial like?”

“A big headache,” she said, and she gave him another closemouthed smile.

“Do I have to testify?” he asked, trying to picture it: laying his hand on a Bible in front of a courtroom full of people and swearing to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth that he'd kept dirty magazines full of dicks and asses in his bedroom for the housekeeper to find. Honestly, the thought alone sort of made him want to take off across the country again.

“No – baby, that's not going to happen. It's not that kind of trial.” She

leaned forward to lay a hand on his arm. She caught his eyes and held them and said deliberately, looking a little steadier, “I will not let that happen. I would relinquish all claims if it came to that.”

“Oh, c'mon,” he said, flushing a little. He didn't add that it couldn't be *that* bad, because he was pretty sure it would actually be the worst thing in the world. (Did divorce witnesses get cross-examined?) But the other choice was them being broke and homeless. He looked at her determined expression. “What about the Avanti?”

He was joking, mostly, and it kind of worked; her eyebrows went up. “Johnny, do you think I'm going through all of this just so you can keep that car?”

“No,” he said, “but I dunno, you also told me you love me very, *very* much, so—”

She tried to put him in a headlock, but she wasn't very good at it – telegraphing the move and going way too slow, and he ended up having to give her some pointers, just because it was kind of embarrassing, and anyway, his mom should know how to do it right, just in case.

After, she collapsed back in her chair with a loud sigh. She sipped her wine, studying him a slightly quizzical smile. “You know, you're pretty good at explaining that. I almost feel like I know how to do it now.”

“I'm pretty good at putting people into headlocks,” he said, shrugging. And then he looked down at the table, expression falling. He glanced around the room at the phone and said, “Did, uh – did Daniel?”

“I only got back in an hour ago, but he hasn't called,” she said quietly. “And there was no message on the machine.”

He nodded once, quickly. Okay.

Johnny vs Dream Daniel

In a dream he later wouldn't remember, Johnny was with Daniel, and Daniel didn't know him. He didn't know how he knew he didn't know him. It was just a fact of the universe, like gravity, or light.

They were in the Avanti, though it also wasn't the Avanti; it looked nothing like his car, but when he tried to focus on the details that were supposedly different, the knowledge of how it should be slid away. The car was red but it wasn't, except it actually was, why was he fighting this? The car was red.

Daniel sat in the passenger seat, if it could be called that, because this Avanti had a bench seat. There was a joke somewhere about that, a joke Daniel should be making, paired with a sidelong leer or maybe just a sweet smile. But he didn't make the joke and Johnny couldn't remember what it was, and anyway, Daniel wasn't looking at him. He watched himself in the side mirror, and he wasn't smiling at all.

Get your knees off the dash, said Johnny.

My knees aren't on the dash, said Daniel, and it was true, they weren't. *Here's good, pull over here.*

Here? There was nothing around. There wasn't even a road.

Yeah, here's good.

Daniel got out of the car.

Daniel got back in the car.

Johnny started driving. *So what's in Parsippany?*

Daniel watched himself in the side mirror, and he wasn't smiling at all. He smacked his gum and said, *I'm not going to Parsippany – are you, are you going to Parsippany? Pull over man, I need to go the other way.*

I can go the other way. He'd go any way the other boy needed.

Daniel leaned across the bench seat, looking at him with eyes that didn't know him. *So why don't you?*

Why don't I what? Johnny was frustrated. *And get your knees off the dash, man.*

Daniel nodded. *Here's good, pull over here.*

Here?

Daniel got out of the car.

Daniel got back in the car.

Johnny started driving. *Look, why don't I just take you all the way?*

Yeah, sure, you do that, sneered Daniel, putting his knees up against the dashboard. Johnny couldn't reach over to slap them down, the bench seat was too long. *Take me all the way, man.*

Driving felt like nothing when there was no scenery to pass, no dashed line on the road to meter out progress. *So what's in Parsippany?* he asked after what he must assume was a while.

The quality of being careful with money or resources.

Oh. He thought about that. *Is it far?*

Too far, decided Daniel abruptly. *Here's good, pull over here.*

Here? Johnny didn't want to stop here, he didn't like the look of the place. He didn't hit the brakes or put the car into park, but somehow they were stopped anyway.

Daniel got out of the car.

Daniel got back in the car. He watched himself in the side mirror, and he wasn't smiling at all.

Johnny started driving.

Johnny vs What He Needs

From a dark, directionless world he emerged: like stepping off a curb, like hopping a car door, like turning around in a crowd and meeting the right pair of eyes. Johnny woke up and knew he wasn't alone.

He blinked dry eyes at the curved, raised paisley surface of his bare mattress; at some point in the night he must've pulled the fitted sheet free. He could feel grit in the corner of his eyes, the sour sleep scum on his tongue, the back of his teeth. He considered the weight behind him, the soft hand resting on his waist.

“When did you get here?” he asked, voice rough.

“I don't know, a while ago,” said Daniel. His mouth must've been close to his ear, because he was practically whispering but the words sounded loud anyway. “Your mom let me in before she left. How long you been awake?”

Am I awake? he wondered. He rolled onto his back and turned his head on the pillow to look at the other boy. Daniel shifted up onto an elbow, propping his head up by a palm; his other hand had slid down when Johnny moved, and now lay limp on the mattress between them.

Daniel was still bruised, of course he was: the faded black eye and newer dark claim to his jaw. Maybe that's why he looked so fragile as he watched Johnny.

“Why didn't you wake me up?” Because surely Daniel loved nothing more that yanking Johnny from the sweet clutches of sleep; surely he missed getting to do it all the time. Johnny thought there must've been a hundred things about waking up next to Daniel he missed, even if the exchange was he got to sleep in.

Daniel lifted one shoulder in a shrug, dark eyes moving somberly over him. “You looked like you needed the sleep.”

“Needed you more,” murmured Johnny, because he was always kind of dumb first thing in the morning. There was a reason he didn't talk much before breakfast.

Daniel reddened and bit his lip, and Johnny's eyes fell away from his face to land on his free hand. He thought about grabbing it, and then

he grabbed it, lacing their fingers together. He thought about closing his eyes again, because the only thing better than waking up to Daniel was getting to fall back asleep next to him. Seconding the thought, his eyelids grew heavy.

“You're not going back to sleep, are you?” asked Daniel. With his incredulity, he finally sounded a shade closer to his usual self.

“No,” said Johnny, frowning and shaking his head slowly. “That doesn't sound like something I'd do.”

“Good. Because we have to talk, Johnny. There's a lot – we have to... oh, c'mon,” he said, as Johnny rolled towards him, tucking his head in the shelter of his bent elbow, because it was less bright there. He could feel the lift and fall of Daniel's sigh over his head. "That's not fair."

Perfection was Daniel giving up and curling his torso a little around his head. He folded a hand over the back of Johnny's neck, and Johnny sank boneless into the mattress.

“Ten minutes, okay,” said Daniel.

Johnny would take whatever he chose to give him.

Johnny vs Words Daniel Will Accept

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Some time later (at least twenty minutes, he found when he checked the bedside clock), Johnny woke up again. He sighed gustily into Daniel's neck, and the other boy's leg twitched against his atop the sheets.

“You didn't call,” he said quietly, not moving.

“Uh,” said Daniel, a little – something, “yes, I *did*. No one picked up. Guess you went out.”

“Oh.” Johnny thought about the eternity that had been the previous day. “Sorry, I – I called, and then I waited, and I guess I got bored.”

Daniel eased back from him, and Johnny let him, though he kept their legs locked. They set their heads on opposite ends of the same pillow and looked at each other. Daniel didn't look angry, he thought; that wasn't it.

“You're not supposed to get bored when we're fighting, Johnny,” he said.

Johnny was pretty sure – like, he'd bet both his legs – that other people didn't feel what he felt when he got bored. But there wasn't a way to say that, there never has been.

So he played dumb and said, “I didn't know we were fighting.” Okay, maybe that was too dumb? “I mean, I just thought you were mad at me.”

“I wasn't mad at you,” said Daniel, and then he paused, expression reconsidering. “Okay, I mean – I was mad. We trashed Mr. Miyagi's shop and you, those guys, and everybody's grandma apparently thinks I'm a nine-stone weakling.”

“What's a nine-stone—”

“*Not* the point,” said Daniel quickly. He clearly didn't know.

“Well, I don't have a grandma, but if I did, I bet she'd find you very

impressive." He didn't even know what he was saying now, he just wanted Daniel to smile and for this to be done.

Except Daniel didn't smile. Daniel pressed his lips tight and stared at him and said quietly, "Johnny, you scared me. In the shop, with that Mike guy."

Johnny's lips parted but he had no words, nothing he could say that would fix that. *I'd never hurt you*, he could say, but it was too late for that to be true. *I'll never hurt you* was more true, but he was pretty sure a normal boyfriend didn't have to say that kind of thing; the threat was inseparable from the promise.

"I mean, do you understand?" asked Daniel anxiously. "Johnny? He looked really hurt, like it could be serious, and that doesn't lead anywhere good, not for anybody."

He wondered if he should ease back, untangle their legs. Talking about this while touching felt weird. Except when he tried to retract them, Daniel tightened his legs.

Johnny met his gaze. He curled his hands into fists beneath the pillow and groped for something he could say, anything he would understand and accept.

"Daniel," he said, halting, "you know I'd – I'd do anything for you."

He stared at Johnny with big, dark eyes, looking almost stricken before the expression smoothed away. But instead of flinching or rolling away, he shifted in close and put his arms carefully around Johnny, tucked his head under his chin like he trusted him after all.

"Yeah, I know. I know that, Johnny," said Daniel quietly. "It's okay."

Which meant it was over, and Johnny was so relieved. He relaxed his hands out of fists and turned a little so he could hold him back, and Daniel surged over him, mouth suddenly desperate for his, and it was fine, it was good, Johnny could say everything he was supposed to this way.

Chapter End Notes

> "nine-stone weakling" is a phrase Daniel knows because Lucille was a fan of The Kinks and he heard "(Wish I Could Fly Like) Superman" a million times as a kid.

Johnny vs Back-Up Communication Protocols

Daniel was over him, knees pinching the bottom of his ribs. But he wasn't saying anything. Johnny was trying to listen but he *wasn't saying anything.*

Daniel bent at the waist and cupped his face and kissed him again like his mouth had never had any other purpose. His breathing was harsh when he allowed space for airing, which he mostly didn't; he took Johnny's mouth like he didn't remember it was bruised and cut from the other night. The sting barely registered for Johnny, so it was alright.

Johnny's hands skated up his sides, slipped under his shirt, and he didn't know if he was trying to hold him steady or hold him back. He felt the hot, spongey mass of the bruise on Daniel's ribs a sharp second before the flinch came. He dropped his hands quickly and tried to sit up, but Daniel wasn't having that – his hands fell from his face to his shoulders, and he shoved Johnny down to the bed again.

Johnny began, “Your, your ribs—”

“It's *fine*,” said Daniel tersely, and Johnny got only a glimpse of his hot eyes before the other boy was sitting up and dragging his shirt over his head.

The bruising along the side of his slender torso drew all his focus. It was like a bomb scar on a beautiful building, like some post-war photo from his old history textbook.

Johnny dug his head back into his pillow. He couldn't look away, could barely blink, at least not until Daniel leaned forward – *doesn't that hurt, should he?* – and tipped his forehead against Johnny's. The words came tight and hushed against his face, drawn venetian blinds on the rest of the world:

“If I can deal with it, then so can you.” His knees slid back and he stretched out over him, a compact weight resting primarily on his hipbones. Daniel knocked his nose against his cheek. “Okay, Johnny? You understand?”

Johnny swallowed and nodded, hands creeping around the small of his back. He wanted to understand. Surely that was the first step.

“Don't think about it,” whispered Daniel, eyes intent and commanding. “Just don't think about it, okay? Focus on me. Focus on the feeling.” And he dug a hand into his hair and turned Johnny's head towards him again, and they were kissing deep.

Pressure grew, almost painful. Daniel was wearing jeans and they were rough against Johnny's rucked boxers, but he didn't care. He reached up and forced a hand under the other boy's waistband, squeezed hard, and Daniel jolted and rolled against him, breaking away to suck in a ragged breath and *yes, jesus, Johnny*.

He lifted himself up, hand going to the button of his jeans, and any other time, Johnny would help and then maybe roll them and get him blushing real pretty for him, but that morning he could only breathe and hold himself together, keep the feeling in the front of his mind like a spot on a bag or a wooden board, not seeing the target but through it: through this moment to the next, one down the line when they'll both be okay and normal again.

Daniel kicked his jeans and boxers off, and Johnny tilted his hips up to drag his own down. He brought a hand up around Daniel's neck to tug him in for another kiss, because it was easier not to look if they were kissing. Daniel got a hand around the both of them and Johnny accidentally bit his lip.

His hand was still on Daniel's ass. He squeezed again, pressing up so he could feel the solidity of him sheltered between his arm and body. His fingers slipped deeper.

On either side of his thighs, Daniel's knees trembled. He made a desperate sound against Johnny's mouth, something between please and *please*, and his grip on their dicks turned erratic, fell out rhythm. But that didn't matter, because something in Johnny responded to that, liked having proof that Daniel needed him for something.

He rubbed his thumb over the swell of his ass, impulsive comfort, and quested further, the pads of his fingertips meeting the tight furl of skin at the center of him. Daniel's hand tightened and loosened and fell away entirely in favor catching himself on the bed at Johnny's hip.

Daniel turned his head, breaking the kiss. He wavered above Johnny, pushing his ass back against his fingers. Johnny stared at the side of his face, the fall of his lashes and flutter of his throat working around the moment. All his previous command and control was gone; he was a shivering, helpless bundle of nerves on his lap.

So Daniel wasn't saying anything, but he was sort of saying something. He trusted Johnny enough – enough to take care of him, at least like this.

Johnny brought his other hand up and squeezed. He rolled his hips and waited for Daniel to fall apart, knowing he'd catch him when it happened.

“Okay,” mumbled Daniel into his neck. “Uh, right. Okay.”

So he still wasn't really saying anything, but at least he was talking. Johnny thought that had to be an improvement, probably. He patted his ass and left his hand there and shut his eyes, thinking: maybe if he fell back asleep, everything would feel better when he woke up.

Daniel shifted on top of him, jostling his dick, which was still half-hard, and Johnny winced.

“Sorry,” he said, sliding off to the side but keeping one leg over him. He grabbed Johnny's hand and put it back on his ass and then looked down. “Oh, you didn't—”

“It's fine,” said Johnny quickly.

“Doesn't seem fair.”

He paused and squinted sidelong at him. “To who?”

And Daniel smiled a little, but it looked like it took some effort and faded twice as fast. He hid his mouth by pressing it against his shoulder, and Johnny thought again maybe they should just sleep. Except it was day, and Daniel refused to sleep when the sun was up; the world was lucky he slept when it was down.

He didn't understand how he still felt like this while they were touching. Daniel was right there. Wasn't he?

“You, uh,” said Daniel quietly. “You know, what you said, before. About how you'd do anything?” Johnny looked at the ceiling and waited. “You shouldn't. I don't think – that doesn't sound like a good idea.”

He felt his face crease. “What?”

Daniel shoved up to his elbows and looked down at him, intent. “It's not a good idea,” he repeated. “I mean, it's very sweet, man, and I appreciate it a hell of a lot—”

“Are you breaking up with me?” he asked blankly, body and mind both rigid with it.

His eyebrows shot up. “No! Jesus, what the hell, Johnny?”

“Then what the fuck?” All he could think was how his hand was still on Daniel's ass, and it would've been the most awkward moment to get his heart broken. His relief almost made the room spin.

Daniel groaned and put his hands over his face. “You said you'd do anything for me, and look, I know me, okay,” he said through his fingers. “I shouldn't have that kind of power. It'll go to my head, I'll abuse it!”

“What are you even talking about right now?” he demanded, starting to feel put out. First he made him think he was breaking up with him, now this nonsense. Just once he wished the other boy would talk like a normal person.

Daniel let his hands drop. “Once, back in Newark, I spent a month lifting sodas from the bodega near my apartment. I knew that little old Polish guy my whole life and I stole from him, and all because that one pair of jeans had the big pockets.”

Johnny stared at him, wordless.

Daniel's mouth thinned. “Okay, that was a bad example. But the point is – I mean, like. What would you do if I asked you to kill someone? Would you kill someone, Johnny?”

“You would never ask me to kill someone,” he said, incredulous.

“That's not the point!”

“Isn't it?” He couldn't believe how dumb this conversation was, and his hand was still on Daniel's ass. Was he doing this on purpose? Maybe he was trying to lighten the mood. He was failing.

“You're being so dumb,” said Daniel, agonized. “This has to be deliberate, right? You cannot be this dumb.”

Okay, so it was definitely on purpose. He rolled his eyes. “Daniel, I'm not going to *kill* anybody. Jesus christ.”

“You hurt that Mike guy.”

“He broke into the shop—”

“Door was unlocked, actually,” he said.

Johnny was going to kill him. He took his hand off his ass and sat up. “Three guys walk into there, looking to kick your ass, yeah, I fucking hurt him. And if they come around again, I'll probably *hurt* him again until they get the message and stop coming around.” He wasn't going to let Daniel get hurt again; the bruises were going to fade and he was never going to see anything like them ever again. Never.

Daniel remained where he was, stretched out naked on the bed and very still. His sprawl was at war with his serious expression as he stared up at Johnny with determined eyes. “And what if what I want you to do for me is not fight?”

“This is ridiculous.” Johnny turned around, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He shook his head at the opposite wall. Ridiculous.

Daniel's arms came around his shoulders as he pressed up against his back. His skin was still hot from before, and Johnny could feel the sweat of his chest slip over his shoulder blades.

“You said anything,” said Daniel into his ear. Johnny clenched his jaw and stared hard at the wall. "Didn't you mean it, Johnny?"

"And what if they do come back? What then? I'll just stand back and watch you," and he couldn't say it.

Daniel kissed his shoulder. His arms tightened. "They won't come back."

He swung around, and Johnny caught him automatically, bolstering his weight and holding him close. Daniel settled in his lap. He reached up to brush his hair back. He smiled into Johnny's eyes and this time the smile had staying power. He seemed calmer suddenly.

"Yeah, how do you know?" asked Johnny. "They call you up and promise?"

"Cops said they'd take care of it," said Daniel.

Tag Team

Daniel Johnny

“So? Will you do that for me, Johnny?” he said.
He ducked close to press a kiss to the corner of his mouth and murmured against his skin, “Will you let it go?”
I just wanted to help, he didn't say. He ground the words down between his teeth and avoided Daniel's gaze, focusing on the wall, the door, the dirty laundry on the floor.
He resisted the coaxing kisses for a couple seconds, but it was a losing battle with Daniel already in his arms.
“C'mon, man,” he said, and he rose up a little on his knees: maybe to scoot closer, maybe so he could look down at Johnny, who finally met his eyes.
Daniel smiled and bumped their noses together. His hand found Johnny's dick and he ran his thumb over the edge of the head, licking his lip as he did it. He glanced down and laughed a little breathily.
Johnny abruptly inhaled deep: defeat or relief, he didn't even know anymore. But Daniel was laughing, so what did it matter.
“There are,” said Daniel around a smirk, lashes falling as he looked into his eyes and wrapped his hand more firmly around Johnny, “*so* many better things you could do with your time.”
“You mean like, have sex with you,” he said.
Daniel gave one of his dorky stupid side nods and his eyes danced up into the air. “Well, hey, now that you mention it....” His eyes returned to Johnny and his smile sobered a little. “Promise me? No more fighting?” he asked quietly.
It wasn't fighting if Johnny looked into this Mike guy, or watched out for anyone coming to the shop or started training more with Dutch and the guys. It was just something to do. Since he had all this free time.
“Yeah,” said Johnny. “I promise."
Daniel didn't sigh in relief because he didn't want Johnny to misread it, so he did the next best thing which was kiss him deeply. He thought maybe this wasn't the worst way to encourage healthy behavior in his boyfriend. Turn away from violence, get a kiss. Stop at six beers, get a kiss! The possibilities were endless.
Johnny breathed up into him, strong arm hitching him closer while his other hand dropped to get a handful of his new favorite part of Daniel, and the thing was.
There was lotion on the bedside table and Daniel couldn't stop thinking about it.

Like why not? What were they waiting for, here. Someday Daniel will be so old, he'll have to do the whole bend and cough thing, and really, wasn't it a good idea to get used to matters now, so he doesn't embarrass himself in the doctor's office? Because when Johnny put his fingers in him, that was – that, that was—

And the thing was, he was pretty sure Johnny would love it. And Johnny said he'd do anything for him, which – anyway, so he'd probably be willing to do this, and seriously, what were they waiting for.

And the other thing was, if Johnny loved it then maybe he'd forget about the fighting. He'd turn all that frankly-sometimes-unnerving focus and attention somewhere useful and good, and hey, Daniel's just saying it could be a win-win scenario.

Daniel jacked him and kissed him, and eyed the lotion over his shoulder.

He broke the kiss and said, “About earlier, I was thinking,” and then he mystifyingly lost all ability to speak.

Johnny didn't seem to notice. He bent his head and kissed the center of his chest, and Daniel stared fixedly at the lotion bottle over his tender blond head.

What was he supposed to say?

I want you to fuck me.

I would like you to fuck me?

Fill 'er up! No seriously, fill me up, man.

Fuck me? Please fuck me? Oh please—

Maybe if they were already going at it hot and heavy, he could just burst out with it, make it seem less premeditated? It was a crime of passion, your honor, I was driven to it.

“But what about you,” said Johnny suddenly. He lifted his head and his blue eyes narrowed in on his. “You're – you'll be careful, right? If the cops mess it up and those guys do come around again, you won't try to like, take them all on your own or whatever. Right?”

And Daniel didn't know why he said it like that, like Daniel was going through life looking for just the right group of bigger boys to get beat by and gosh darn if he hasn't found the right one yet!

“Of course,” he said.

Johnny widened his eyes meaningfully and his hand squeezed his ass again, and Daniel didn't think he realized how unhelpful that tactic was to his overall mission, like talk about distracting. And Johnny thought he was good at fighting? Please. Put those hands to better use, Johnny.

Daniel wondered if he could come just from Johnny's fingers.

He was pretty sure they had to, like, stretch him. So he could take him. What if he shot his load in the pregame? Could he recover in

time to come *again* while Johnny was still going at it? The possibilities were endless.

“Promise?” said Johnny, insistent, and Daniel blinked. He tried to concentrate. What were they talking about? Daniel and bigger boys, right.

Well – it wasn't taking them all on by himself; in the All Valley, he'll just have to fight the one guy. And his track record with one-on-one matches was pretty good, so there wasn't even anything to worry about.

“Yeah,” said Daniel. “I promise.”

Johnny vs Asking For It

“I have to get to the shop,” said Daniel, walking backwards through the pool house, and Johnny didn't know if he was chasing him or being pulled, but either way the other boy kept getting caught in the circle of his arms. He wasn't ready to let him go. Daniel's eyes moved over Johnny. He sounded very far away as he continued, “we're replacing the windows today.”

“Yeah,” agreed Johnny, stepping closer, intent on how Daniel's chest hitched against his own. He ducked his head to softly kiss his neck below his ear, and Daniel tilted his head for him, hands moving over his back, eight-point pressure along his spine.

He had him up against a wall without really meaning to, and then his palm was cupping the front of his jeans and Daniel's legs were shaking.

“I,” said Daniel, as Johnny pinned his hips so he didn't fall over. He dropped to his knees and Daniel said, sounding lost, “The shop?”

“Yeah,” said Johnny, and he pressed his face against his dick, reveling in the hardness, the way his hands went to his shoulders and helplessly stroked and gripped him. He opened his mouth around the shape of him and suddenly it seemed important that he—

“Take it out?” he said, peering up the length of his chest.

Daniel stared down at him.

Johnny sat back on his heels like he was waiting for a match to start. He looked at Daniel's dick, the demanding outline of it under the denim. He looked up into his eyes, and he could feel the flush unfurl across his face, but he didn't look away. He rolled his shoulders a little against the moment. Shook off the discomfort.

“Please,” he said, and Daniel flushed hard and immediate, so he said it again. He rose back up onto his knees and held the back of his thighs and let the words come, whatever they were, and they were: “Please, I want – I want to make you feel good, okay.” And it wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth either, and something in him needed Daniel to know more of the truth, his truth, so he pressed his face against his hip and said quietly, “I need it. Let me have it, please.”

Above him, Daniel swore. A second later, he was fumbling for his fly.

Johnny closed his eyes and breathed and the moment he sensed Daniel had taken himself out – he could smell him – he turned his face to receive it. He ghosted along the length, the silky soft skin so responsive to his lips, his mere breath. There was no doubting how Daniel felt when he touched him: he felt good, and he felt good to Johnny, and Johnny was good for him, and that made Johnny feel good, and *you're so good*, Daniel was telling him, *you're incredible, you're the. The best thing that's ever – Johnny, Johnny, oh god, Johnny, take your time, man, I'm not going anywhere, not when you – you're so good, please never stop, don't stop, and will. Will you – ?*

Johnny lifted his mouth to pant out, *anything. Anything*. Daniel was big and heavy in his mouth, head nudging back, back, and with every difficult swallow Johnny's own dick seemed to jerk in his boxers, and sure, he could touch himself but why touch himself when he could touch Daniel? Daniel, who was babbling over his head and like a magnet flipped, a connection was made and suddenly he was *hearing* him and Daniel was asking Johnny to fuck him, *please, need you inside me so bad*, and Johnny forgot to breathe and swallowed hard and then choked and coughed as Daniel came down his throat.

Daniel sort of slid-tipped over to join him on the floor, looking dazed. Johnny coughed some more, blinking tears back. He stared at Daniel, who was sort of gazing at his dick.

“What,” he said, and his voice was wrecked, it took two more attempts to get the words out, “What did you say?”

Red-faced, Daniel thumped his head back against the wall and shut his eyes. “Shit. I have to get to the shop,” he said after a moment, but that wasn't what he'd said, he'd said he wanted Johnny to fuck him, Johnny was pretty sure.

He rubbed his hands down his bare thighs. Should he pretend he hadn't heard? Should he let Daniel go to the shop? Or, or should he drag him back into his bedroom and—

Daniel cracked an eye open. “You want to come with?” he asked, and his eyes were on his dick again.

“To?” asked Johnny, thinking he was pretty sure he had lotion on his bedside table, and that was probably fine, right.

Daniel had reacted to his fingers like he temporarily lost all language,

like he fell into himself, into some deep, pre-verbal state, and Johnny wanted to know him down there like he wanted to know him anywhere.

“The shop, Johnny. Because I have to go. To the shop. And you could come with.” Daniel shifted against the wall and flapped a hand. He sighed, “Yknow, to the shop.”

“Oh,” he said, dragging his mind back out of the bedroom and shutting the door firmly. He blinked and cleared his throat, which hurt, and he saw Daniel register that it hurt, and the bedroom door threatened to swing back open again, so he hurriedly said, “No, I – I actually. I have some stuff to do.”

“What stuff?” demanded Daniel, sounding almost offensively skeptical. It was easier to keep the bedroom door closed when he sounded like that.

“Looking for a job,” said Johnny, and that sounded pretty good, really believable. He knew it was the perfect lie, too, because Daniel actually looked disappointed, like he knew he couldn't coax Johnny into tagging along and being monitored against random urges to fight, or whatever he thought was happening with Johnny. Because Johnny was looking for a job and that was like, the most important thing a person could ever do, basically. It was sacred.

“Okay,” said Daniel, unenthused as he tucked himself away. They both stood up. “I'll go to the shop, you'll look for a job. Great. Cool.”

Johnny didn't fully understand what was going on with himself. He was reacting to something, something that made him press Daniel against the wall again. His dick was still mostly hard; he let it be known.

“You're really killing me here,” said Daniel.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” said Johnny.

He pushed and pulled him into turning around, and it was mesmerizing how he just *did* it, like they were both in a dream, neither fully in control of his actions. Daniel pressed his forehead to the wall and let Johnny drape over his back, his dick hot and wishful against his jean-clad ass. Johnny let himself imagine it for a moment, and he watched Daniel imagine it. The other boy's eyes were closed, and he was sucking on his lower lip, breath coming a little ragged.

“You have to get to the shop,” said Johnny, stepping back.

“Jesus christ,” said Daniel.

Johnny vs Mission Command

Jim leaned forward from the back seat of the Avanti and squinted between him and Dutch. “Look, I feel real bad about Daniel and all, I mean. I'm sorry to hear about your troubles, Johnny. But what do you need me for, exactly?”

“It's like he said,” said Dutch, twisting to smirk at him. “We need a distraction and you cry the prettiest.”

“That's not what I said,” said Johnny.

“I'm not going to cry,” said Jim. “Man, it was one time, and I *told* you, my grandma had just died. I was kinda of going through a lot. You ever gonna to let it go?”

Dutch thought about it. “No.”

“Okay, shut up, both of you,” said Johnny. Christ, he wished Bobby hadn't decided he was above some basic infiltration and theft. He looked over at them, still bickering, and snapped his fingers. “*Hey*.” They looked over and he nodded at the arena. “Okay, so the main office is just inside to the left. I need you two to go in, stage a fight, draw the receptionist out. Then I'll go in and grab the registration file.”

“Man, not that I mind shoving Jimmy around—”

“It's *Jim*,” muttered the boy in the back.

Dutch ignored him. “But how do you even know they keep the registrations in there? Maybe they're in a locked filing cabinet, or a completely different office.”

Jesus, it was just a high school tournament. Was he the only one who remembered that?

“I went with Sensei a couple years back – they had some problem with how many students he was trying to register or whatever. I don't know. But the lady literally just kept the folder in the bottom drawer of her desk.”

“Wait,” said Jim suddenly, “if we steal these guys' registrations, won't it mess with their tournament? Like, what if they show up next month and aren't allowed to fight?”

“Sucks to be them,” said Dutch, and Johnny agreed. He couldn't care about collateral damage right now.

“Okay,” he said, looking between them. “Ready?”

“I'm going to punch you in the face,” Dutch told Jim, who sighed.

Johnny vs Heist Shit

Johnny dropped back and let Dutch and Jim go into the building first. A quick glance through the open door of the administrative office showed a receptionist reading something at her desk; no one else appeared to be in the room or nearby in the outer hall. Middle of the day, whatever day it was that day. Perfect.

The other boys glanced back as he immediately went left and pressed himself against the wall outside the office. He nodded at them: go time.

Dutch shoved Jim hard, sending him stumbling back a few feet. “That hell were you doing with her, motherfucker?”

“Hey, man, she came to me,” said Jim, and Johnny blinked hard and looked over a little wildly at the sound of his voice. Then he remembered: Jim did the school play two years in a row, that's right. Weird.

Jim stepped sideways, letting the scene take up space as Dutch turned with him.

“Guess she wasn't getting what she needed,” he laughed. “Believe me, that's no longer a problem.”

Dutch lunged and got his fists in his shirt, and then they were struggling and yelling.

Johnny pressed himself tighter against the wall as the receptionist appeared in the doorway, looking out. He studied her profile, the pinch of displeasure and impatience in her mouth and eyes behind her glasses, and for a moment he was worried they'd missed the mark. They should've done this in the morning maybe; maybe office workers weren't in the mood to deal with shit like two fighting boys when it was nearing lunchtime?

But the moment passed and she sighed and stepped forward, irritably calling, “Here now, stop that—”

Johnny pivoted inside the room. He slipped quickly between the chairs along the desk and the row of filing cabinets and rounded her desk; absorbed the lurid sci-fi paperback set pages-down: freaky pale women with orange hair, building spires, an inexplicable but

unshakable impression of weird sex stuff; crouched and yanked open the bottom drawer.

Outside, the receptionist was trying to get a word in edgewise; Jim was spinning an epic tale of teenage love and lost, the twists operatic and so soapy Johnny didn't know how he was talking around the suds.

Accordion folder, bingo. Just like he remembered. He thought about just taking the whole thing, but he couldn't be sure how deep the weirdness with All-Valley went, and figured that might tip someone somewhere off. He unwound the string and opened the folder.

Barnes near the front, got it. Reid and Roberts, right next to each other. Torres. Weddle bringing up the rear.

He put the folder back in the desk and shot back to his feet, shoving the folded registrations into his back pocket. He took three steps and the receptionist stepped back into the room.

She looked at him. He looked at her.

“Can I help you?” she asked, and she really didn't sound like she'd enjoyed Jim's soap.

“Uh,” said Johnny. He put his hands on his hips and looked around the room. “I was – I was wondering if it was too late to register for the All-Valley Under-18 Karate Tournament?”

She walked past him to her desk, completely incurious. “Early registration is closed. If you want to compete, you'll have to show up an hour early the day of the tournament and go through the qualifying round.”

He hadn't actually known that. He tried to imagine fighting the qualifying round: the danger of falling asleep on his feet was very real.

“Oh,” he said, shifting back on his heels, leaning towards the door. “Okay. Uh, thanks.”

She sat and scooted her desk chair forward. She stopped and peered at him more closely. “Wait, you look familiar.”

But Johnny was already almost out the door. “Just one of those faces, I guess.”

Johnny vs The List

“You could've pulled your punch more, man,” said Jim, wiggling his jaw from side to side like he was checking for dislocation. “There's an art to stage fighting, you know.”

Dutch folded his arms and leaned against the Avanti, which Johnny tolerated because he was distracted by more important things.

“Is that what you call what you did Junior year, that prancing knight shit?” he asked Jim.

“It was the Scottish play, and it was sword fighting, and you didn't have to come watch. In fact, I'm pretty sure I remember asking you guys not to.”

He turned his head and spat. Shrugged. “Looked gay as shit.”

“And yet you came to every performance. And should you say stuff like that now?” asked Jim, jerking his head towards Johnny, who was barely listening to them. “Since – y'know.”

Dutch just stared at him blankly.

Johnny glanced up from the registrations. “Okay, so two of the names don't have a dojo listed. Do we start with them, do you think? Like, maybe if this Mike guy is unaffiliated, that's his angle – he's hoping to get picked up by a dojo if he wins the All-Valley? Get noticed?”

Dutch snapped his fingers and Johnny passed him the pages.

He checked his watch; he had a little over an hour until he said he'd meet Daniel for lunch. He'd hoped to get more done before then. Why was it the day suddenly disappeared beneath your feet the moment you actually have stuff to do? He couldn't win.

“Kick Lift Karate's nearby,” said Dutch, pausing over Mike Reid's registration. “I know it's not what you just said, but—”

“Yeah,” said Johnny, hand already digging his jeans pocket for his keys. “We should check anyway.”

“I actually have a lecture at one,” began Jim. They looked at him and he shifted on his feet. “...But I can skip it.”

“Attaboy, Jimmy,” said Dutch.

Jim sighed.

Johnny vs Mike Reid

“It's the middle of the day,” said Jim, leaning over the front seat, eyes narrowed against the wind.

“So?” said Johnny, eyes on the traffic light ahead. Stale green; he accelerated and shot through the intersection just as it turned yellow. Behind them, Jim fell back in the seat.

“So,” said Jim, hauling himself forward again, “he's probably not going to be around. I mean, it might not even be open.”

“If it's not open, we'll come back later,” he said, thinking: forty minutes until lunch with Daniel, then lunch with Daniel, and then the afternoon to continue the search. He promised Dutch he'd spar a little too, in exchange for his help. And then that evening, stake-out.

“What are we even going to do if we do find him?” said Jim. “Like, what's the plan?”

Johnny blinked. His eyes slid over and met Dutch's. The other boy had his elbow out the window, his hand tapping the top of the door. When Johnny looked at him, the hand curled deliberately into a fist. Dutch winked.

“We'll take it as it comes,” said Johnny, returning his gaze to the street. He took a hard left and Jim fell back again.

“Hey dipshit, how about you fucking buckle up?” said Dutch, twisting to glare into the backseat.

Kick Lift Karate was in a small studio between a barbershop and a dentist's office. Its sign was simple: a black-edged red circle with white lettering, very boring. Not badass. It was clearly one of those dojos that emphasized fitness rather than kicking ass.

“I don't think this is gonna be the right one,” he said, because his gut felt pretty sure.

“Let's check anyway,” said Jim, cupping his hands on the window and peering inside. “I mean, it looks open.”

Johnny shrugged and reached for the door, and for the first time in nearly a year, the cobras stepped into a karate dojo.

They stood on the edge of the mat, walking no further, and looked around. Dutch elbowed Johnny to draw his attention to a display case on the right. They all shuffled closer to look at the photos and trophies held inside.

“Do you see him?” asked Jim. “Is one of them him?”

Johnny looked closely at the two small rows of unsmiling boys arrayed in blue gis. He shook his head.

“Hello?” called a man poking his head out of a backroom. The three of them unconsciously straightened as they turned to look over, wary and unblinking.

The man was tall, sandy-haired and freckled; he looked like a camp counselor or something. He smiled at them as he approached, easy and open. “Hi there, can I help you? Are you interested in learning karate?”

Dutch made a slight scoffing noise under his breath. Jim looked at Johnny, who said:

“We know karate.”

The man's smile faded slightly. His eyes went between them and faded further at whatever he thought he saw. “I see. You boys belong to a local dojo?”

Johnny thought about how it used to feel to enter the Arena, a long chain of black gis, the way people made way for them or were made to. He thought about standing tall and proud with the wall of other cobras. He thought about Bobby taking out Daniel's knee. The sound the crowd made when Johnny slammed his elbow into it. People staring in the parking lot. Whispering.

Cobra Kai used to mean something in the valley. Now it meant something else.

“We were looking for a guy, we thought he might be one of your students?” he said, instead of answering the question. He described

Mike as best he could. Their age. Johnny's height or thereabouts. Brown crew cut. It was hard to describe him without insulting him, but he did his best.

“I'm not sure?” began the man, folding his hands in front of him.

“His name was Mike?”

His expression cleared. “The only Mike I have is fifteen, with red hair.” Johnny thought he looked almost relieved, for some reason.

“Oh. Okay. Well – thanks anyway,” he said, and he stepped back. On either side of him, Dutch and Jim also stepped back. The man stood and watched until they left the dojo.

Back in the world, they loitered on the sunny sidewalk beside the Avanti. Dutch dug out his cigarette and pinched one into his mouth.

“That was weird,” he said. He sparked his lighter and inhaled deep, dark eyes narrowed thoughtfully back at the storefront of the dojo.

“Yeah, he almost looked scared of us,” said Jim. “Hey, can I have one?”

“Man, you never have your own.”

“My mom would smell it on me, she says it's a bad habit.”

“Do you know what's also a bad habit? You living in fear of your mom.”

“Man, she'd kill me if she caught me smoking.” Jim took a cigarette and lit it and passed the light back to Dutch before looking around at Johnny. “Well? What now?”

Johnny looked up from the crack in the pavement he'd been studying. He wrinkled his nose a little and waved a hand at the other boys' smoke and then checked his watch.

“Now I've a got a lunch thing,” he said.

Johnny vs A Lunch Thing

When he rolled up outside, Daniel was already in the diner, sitting in a booth by the front window. Johnny cut the engine and looked through the windshield and window to the other boy, who had his head turned towards the parking lot. Their eyes met through the double glass.

Daniel looked surprised, almost, or maybe caught out. He didn't blink when Johnny smirked a little and straightened fully out of the car and shut the driver door. Daniel shook his head slightly; his lips parted.

“Sorry I'm late,” he said inside, sliding into the booth opposite the other boy. There was a soda already waiting for him, the glass wet with condensation, bubbles sluggish in their rise to the surface.

“How's the job search going?” asked Daniel, looking him over closely like he might find a badge announcing he was newly employed, or maybe he just liked looking at him.

Johnny didn't have a badge, but he'd come prepared. He waved a folded newspaper, which he had taken the time earlier to fill with circles around random job ads. “It's going.” He tossed it down on the table, but Daniel completely ignored it in favor of watching him some more.

“I ordered you a cheeseburger, hope you don't mind,” he said, eyes dipping to his throat and then sliding further.

Johnny shrugged. “You know what I like.”

“Yeah,” said Daniel.

They looked at each other, and the diner bled away. Daniel's tongue was fretting over his front teeth, and his color was a little up, and his eyes—

“Oh,” said Johnny, shifting, “it's, it's still.”

Daniel nodded absently. “Yeah.”

He rubbed the back of his neck and considered the situation. He thought maybe he should play it cool. But as he tried slouching down in his seat and shuffled his knees wide, he could only think about the weight of Daniel in his lap, the limber bend of his long legs around

him. The slick, hungry press of his mouth.

Why play it cool? It's not like it was a secret from Daniel that Johnny wanted him, was it?

He thought about the look on the other boy's face when he'd said *please*, and he thought about how Daniel blushed whenever Johnny pinned him, and he thought about how enjoyable it was when Daniel got so worked up his brain stopped working. A familiar feeling rose up within him, and he distantly recognized it was not entirely unlike the feeling he'd get when he used to shove Daniel around: the strange thrill when Daniel insistently shoved back, no matter how outmatched he was.

Johnny slowly slid his foot against Daniel's. He breathed deep and smiled, close-mouthed.

Daniel narrowed his eyes suspiciously. His left hand fiddled with his napkin-wrapped fork and knife: tap, tap, tap on the table.

“So,” said Johnny quietly, “you're going to let me give it to you?”

“...Okay, you know what?” asked Daniel after a difficult few seconds. He was now looking anywhere but at Johnny; his face was a brilliant red, and his fingers were trembling minutely as he gesticulated. “We... are not doing this.”

Johnny lightly pressed their calves together. “We're not? But I thought you wanted it.” He paused and added, “I want it. I'd make it good,” thinking he could prepare everything, with lots of drinks and snacks, good tunes. Anything Daniel might need. He'd make it perfect for him.

Daniel leaned across the table and said deliberately, “I mean, I'm not going to live like this from now to eternity. You being – like this, like, you think I can't tell you're enjoying this?”

“Enjoyment's kinda the point, I thought. I mean, it's sex.”

“Johnny, if you don't stop looking at me like that, I'm going to drag you into the bathroom of this diner and put an end to this, right here, right now.”

And Johnny wanted to ask how that would even work, but his mind helpfully flashed on him and Daniel in a stall, the other boy clutching the top of the metal divider and tilting his ass back to let Johnny drive into him. He blinked and frowned and reached slowly to unwrap his

own fork and knife. He unfolded the napkin and put it casually over his lap, like he was just getting ready to eat neatly.

“That's not very romantic,” he said at last. Daniel put his overheated face down on the table, and Johnny relented. “Okay, look – how about tonight?”

Daniel rolled his forehead over the formica and looked despairingly out the window of the diner. “I told Mr. Miyagi I'd help him mulch the garden,” he said, voice dead.

“Okay.” He thought about it. “Tomorrow night?”

Daniel sat up and gave him a narrow look. “*Tomorrow*?”

“Yeah.”

“Tomorrow we're going to Fresno, remember?”

He paused. “*We* are? Or you and—”

“Johnny,” he sighed.

“Right. Okay. Sure, Fresno.” And he thought about that. “Are we—”

“We're taking the Ford,” said Daniel flatly.

“Right.”

Their food arrived, interrupting the deliberation. Johnny dragged his plate close, because with the food in front of him, he realized he was actually kind of starving. He reached for the ketchup and then paused, brow knitting. He looked over at Daniel.

“Wait, am I meeting your mom?”

Daniel propped his chin in his hand and regarded him very evenly. Johnny took a drink of his soda and stared back unblinking.

“Can we go back to the part where you really want my dick?” he asked after the long moment had sort of outstayed its welcome.

Johnny vs Stakeout Difficulties

“I don’t really understand,” said Jessica, over by her pottery wheel. “Why do you have to do this in here?”

“Oh – vantage points,” said Johnny vaguely, looking narrowly up and down the street. “Sight lines.”

“You can see the same stretch of street over in the bonsai shop.” And there was that faint suspicion in her voice again. She had helpfully told him three times that she was in a relationship, like she thought he had the hots for her, or something. It was awkward.

“I can’t watch from the bonsai shop. Daniel’s in there.” And if Johnny went in there now, then Johnny-and-Daniel would be in there, in the quiet dark all alone, and Johnny couldn't stay vigilant then. Way things have been between them today, he'd have Daniel naked and gasping in under two minutes, and then an Amtrak train could derail and crash through the building and probably neither of them would notice.

“I thought you and Daniel were friends.”

“We are.”

She sighed and stood, grabbing a towel to wipe her clay-wet hands on. She walked over and stood beside him to peer out the window at the dark street.

“So this is a secret, then,” she said at the window. He could see from their dark reflection that she was looking at him sidelong. He hoped she didn’t have the hots for him. That would be awkward too.

“Look, you’ve met the guy, right?” he said, taking a discreet step to the right to put a little more space between them.

“Yeah, sure. He’s great.”

“What do you mean by *great*?” he asked suspiciously; what if she had the hots for Daniel? That would be—

“He was very friendly?” And now she sounded uncertain.

“Right, friendly,” he said, nodding. “But the thing you don’t know about him is that he’s actually a trouble magnet.”

“Really?” she said doubtfully.

“Oh, yeah. Big time. Kid could walk into a nursing home, and he’d magically zero in on the *one geezer* with a bad temper and dementia who got like, shot down by Italians in World War II or something. Ten minutes later it would be full-scale brawl, canes flying left and right, and Daniel in the middle still going, *who, little old me*?” He broke off when he noticed she was staring at him. “What?”

She shook her head. “Nothing, just. Wow.”

Johnny rolled his shoulders, face coloring a little. He resumed watching the street. “Yeah, well.”

“Still,” she said, “I kind of think he got the message the other night. Did you figure out who those guys were? What did they want, anyway?”

He shook his head grimly. “Don't know. Not yet. Something to do with karate in the valley.”

She obviously didn't know what to make of that. She shifted back on her heels. “Right. Well – I guess you can hang around, but I do have to close up some time, you know that, right? You can’t stay here all night.”

“I don’t need to,” he said, watching the light in the window across the street. Every couple minutes, he could see Daniel’s dark head walking around inside, faintly bouncing with that dopey walk of his. “Just until he goes home.”

Jessica turned back to her wheel. “You don’t have a job, do you? Or school?”

“No.” He paused and squinted over his shoulder. “Why do you say it like that, like I’m a bum?”

“I didn’t,” she defended, perching on her stool. She gave him a close-mouthed smile and depressed the pedal on the pottery wheel. “Actually, I think you’re very sweet.”

He *knew* it. “Hey, you know, er – I’m kind of already dating someone….”

Her eyes went wide and she nodded slowly. “Yeah,” she said. “I kind of figured.”

Johnny vs The Basics

“Hey, so,” she said behind him. “You do karate?”

He turned on the pottery stool and brought his gaze down from the ceiling. He was so incredibly bored; if this was what stakeouts were like, he didn't think he was suited to being a detective. “Yeah.”

“You any good?”

“I'm the best,” he said absently, glancing back out the window.

“Really? But I thought Daniel,” and when he turned to look at her, she visibly changed tack, “anyway, I was sort of wondering. I mean, since you're here and all.”

Johnny blinked and wondered if he was about to get hired to beat someone up. Maybe *that* could be his job? Except he didn't think Daniel would like that very much. He tried picturing it, some day in the future maybe when they lived together: Daniel coming home from the bonsai shop to Johnny icing his knuckles again at the kitchen table. He was startled by how clear the image was, and what it did to him.

“Sorry, what?” he said belatedly. She'd asked something.

“I said, do you think you could show me some moves. You know, karate. Just like – a couple punches, maybe. You know, the basics.”

“Karate's not for girls,” he said automatically.

Her jaw dropped. “Are you serious?” she demanded after a moment, and christ. He didn't need this.

“Look – no offense,” he said quickly, because he really needed her to not kick him to the curb. “It's not me saying that, it's nature. Girls don't have the strength or the stamina—”

“Last winter, I hiked the San Antonio ridge line to the summit of Mt. Baldy,” she said.

“Okay,” he said, nonplussed. “Good for you, you can walk?” He pointed at her. "Hey, I never said girls couldn't walk."

She folded her arms and gave him a narrow look. He was very familiar

with this look; Ali used to give him this look. Ali, and Susan, and sometimes even Barbara.

“That's eleven miles of rugged terrain," she said slowly. "Over *ten thousand feet* in elevation gain. And I did it in seven hours, so don't tell me I can't manage a simple punch.”

Johnny rolled his eyes and sighed. He glanced out at the street, but it remained stupefyingly empty. Whatever, he was so bored.

“Okay, fine.”

He stood and gestured her to do the same. He watched her shake out her shoulders and loosen up and wondered where he should start. The basics were called basic for a reason: after a certain point, you're not supposed to even have to think about them. His memory of Sensei drilling him was very faint, a watercolor impression of fatigue and sore muscles and a frantic determination not to mess up.

“So – do you know how to – no.” Because she'd raised her fists, and it was already all wrong. “Okay, rule number one: never put your thumb inside your fist. You'll break it, and then you won't be able to punch anyone anymore.” She untucked her thumb and slowly waved her fists at him like they were pom-poms. He nodded. “Okay, and – you want to keep your wrist perfectly straight, like this, see?”

And then he got so distracted, working out how to best show her a punch, he forgot to check on the street. But it turned out alright; no one ever showed up.

Johnny vs He's Still Not Doing Phone Sex, Daniel

“So,” said Daniel brightly, drawing the word out.

“No,” said Johnny. He glanced around the kitchen and leaned forward to crane his head first towards the living room, then around the corner down the short hall; his mom's bedroom door was closed.

“No, what?”

“No, I'm still not having phone sex,” he said, the last half of the sentence dropping into a muffled whisper. He returned to the kitchen and opened the fridge, bypassing the half-empty bottle of white wine to grab a beer. Daniel made some protesting noise in his ear, and Johnny held the phone out at arm's length, cracking the can as he did, because he could be strategic sometimes.

“...the one who said you wanted it to be romantic?" Daniel was saying when he tucked the receiver back against his ear. “I'm just saying, we should discuss! You know, make a plan of attack here.”

Plan of attack, jesus. How was he always the worst? Johnny shook his head and stared at the ceiling and said patiently, “It's not romantic if we're both doing the planning.”

“Well, alright, so let me plan it,” countered Daniel, of course. “I mean, who said you get to be in charge of it? It's my ass on the line, here. I could plan, I'm great at planning.”

Now he was actively growing annoyed. “Daniel, your idea of a plan is jumping into a stranger's car and then jumping out again in the middle of the desert when he turns out to be a pervert.”

“Oh right,” said Daniel; kinda pissy, what the hell, “whereas *your* idea of a plan was to steal a car and just drive around randomly for a while with no change of clothes, no food, no destination—”

He slammed his can down on the counter and only just remembered to keep his voice low. “That's different.”

“*How's* it different?” he demanded.

“Because this time I'm not planning for me, I'm planning for you.” And

when Daniel didn't immediately say anything in response, he pushed his advantage, “If you seriously think I'd be willing to show up and just do what you say (“Well, won't you?” muttered Daniel, and Johnny ignored this) – just shove it in you, like, hey, let's see what happens, then you're insane. You're insane. I'm the one who had all the skin mags, remember? If I'm going to fuck you, then we're doing it right, we're going to have *time* to do it right, it's going to be comfortable, and I'm going to spend at least twenty minutes opening you with my fingers, figuring out what you like so I can do it well. You'll be fucking begging me to continue by the time I'm through, that's how careful and thorough I'm going to be. Okay?”

Daniel didn't say anything for a couple seconds, and then: “Okay, if you – if you could just maybe, like, run that by me again, except maybe this time a little slower—”

Johnny turned the receiver against his face and said clearly into the mouth piece, “Not happening.”

Johnny vs Home

“Well, that was a bust,” said Dutch, once they'd jogged down the four flights of stairs and out of Mike Weddle's apartment building. Down on the street outside, Johnny was pretty sure he could still hear the dogs barking. He winced and started walking to the Avanti.

“Not a bust – we know it wasn't him, at least.” Two names down, and just the one left without a listed dojo.

“Damnit. I think it might've broken the skin?” said Jim, hopping as he tried multi-tasking walking while tugging up his jeans to peer at his calf. “What if it had rabies?”

“Guess we'll know when you start foaming at the mouth,” said Dutch.

They reached the Avanti and Jim climbed into the back seat and rolled up the leg of his jeans. The three of them leaned forward to inspect the raised pink skin of his leg.

“Looks like it's just a graze,” said Johnny.

“Can you get rabies from a graze?” wondered Jim, squinting up at them. Johnny shrugged; Dutch scratched his jaw and shook his head.

Johnny got back behind the wheel and sighed, putting his head back against the seat. He closed his eyes and thought of the rest of the day: investigating the other names on the list, going home to clean up and pack, waiting for Daniel while figuring out how to act around his mom, driving to Fresno, hopefully not fucking everything up? Easy.

He opened his eyes, hand automatically reaching for the ignition. “Okay, what's the address for the other guy without a listed dojo? The Barnes guy?”

The address on Michael Barnes' registration slip wasn't a residential address, but a suite in a shopping center in Northridge. It took them twenty minutes in traffic. Johnny parked as soon as they hit the right block.

They climbed out of the car with Jim still trying to fend off Dutch as he explained why he had to get back after lunch, because he had an

exam in biology or something equally pointless-sounding. Johnny glanced at the shop numbers and they started walking down the sidewalk.

“What's the worst that will happen if you miss it?” demanded Dutch around a lit cigarette.

“My GPA will tank and I'll be forced to drop out of college? I'll bring shame to my entire family, ruin my future?”

Johnny scanned the building at the corner: a flat-topped, nondescript cement structure with a large glass front. It looked it might've once been a grocery store or something, had that kind of vibe. It was the right address, though; he glanced down at the registration in his hand to check. He looked up, brow pinched in confusion.

And he stopped walking. The other two boys bumped into his shoulders.

“Johnny? This it?” asked Jim, peering at the windows, mostly blocked by long blinds.

Johnny didn't say anything. He backed up a step, two steps, head tilting to take it in. He felt more than saw Dutch and Jim follow suit; felt more than saw when they saw it. When they realized.

“Wait,” said Jim. “That's—”

“Yeah,” said Johnny, numb with it, with what it might mean. “It is.”

Dutch tore his half-finished cigarette out of his mouth and tossed it to the ground. “What the fuck?” he wanted to know; Johnny didn't have any answers.

The three boys stood together in front of the store, looking at the familiar twisting cobra above their heads. It reared up over the sidewalk: black and poison-yellow, slit eyes, fanged hiss. Ready to strike.

In His Head, He's Always Losing

Johnny had a voice once,
and then he didn't.

It wasn't sweet, but it could be beautiful,
and it was all his own, or so he thought,
until it wasn't, and he didn't.

There was never any mistaking the words
he chose; people always understood
when he spoke, except
suddenly they couldn't, because it wasn't, and he didn't.

If it can be taken from you, was it ever really yours?

After LaRusso and his sensei walked away and the crowd dispersed, Sensei wept over his bleeding hands. He pushed unsteadily to his feet, fingers still half-curled in the memory of the thrown punch. He cradled his fists against his chest and made strange noises with his mouth. Rusty, shallow sounds. Uneven. They seemed surely fake, like he was doing it on purpose: like he was making himself drown on air.

Bobby said: *Johnny, are you okay? Tip your head, man, let me get a look at your throat.*

Tommy said: *I can't believe he did that, I can't. I can't believe he did that. Why did he do that. Do you think – do you think he would've—*

Dutch said *nothing* and stared across the parking lot at *nothing*.

He didn't know what Jimmy said. He either didn't notice or couldn't remember, or maybe Jimmy hadn't even been there; half the dojo had already left at that point – the last time they were all together in one place, wearing the same colors, and it was over like it had never been at all.

There was a voice that once lived inside Johnny, and then there wasn't.

Home to Encino

PART TWO

Sometimes Daniel's legs woke up before the rest of him: toes flexing or feet dancing at the ankle socket – or even sometimes, like that morning, he'd wake up with his feet braced flat on the bed, knees up in the air like he was about to flex back into a kip up if-he-could-do-a-kip-up, which of course made him think of Johnny. And while his legs were restlessly knocking together a little, going, hey, why are we not already up? *he* was thinking about this position and how maybe he'd always been waiting for it; maybe he'd always wanted it.

He breathed in deep and closed his eyes again. He brought his knees up to his chest and reached down past his dick and kept thinking of Johnny.

That afternoon, Daniel threw his backpack into the back seat of the Ford and said, “You're sure you can handle everything by yourself? The shop and the, the trees?” And before the man could respond, he added, reassuring: “Those guys shouldn't be back, you know. It's taken care of, I think. You know, in case you were worried – who am I kidding, since when do you worry. Well, anyway – you'll be good here? I should be back in two days. I mean, it's just Fresno.”

Mr. Miyagi nodded and said, “Miyagi make do. Somehow.”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. *Somehow*.”

He hopped behind the wheel and buckled up, checked his mirrors. Mr. Miyagi stepped up to the driver door and looked down at him.

“Lawrence-san going on road trip?” he asked.

Daniel leaned back, right arm slipping up to rest along the seat; Johnny always looked very nonchalant when he did it, so it seemed like the right move here. He nodded and said casually:

“Yeah... yeah, Johnny's coming. Ma wants to thank him,” he explained. “You know, for giving me a ride to Jersey.”

And those hadn't been her precise words, but Daniel was sure she'd work her way around to them. Eventually.

Mr. Miyagi studied him for a moment. “Friends very important.”

“Mm,” said Daniel, internally wincing; he should say something. Should he say something? But just then didn't feel like the right moment – he was about to take off, after all. It could wait. Daniel would find the perfect time for this discussion, and really, did it even have to be a discussion? Maybe he could write Mr. Miyagi a letter, slip it in there super casual. No, what was he thinking, that letter would be a nightmare to write; he'd stay up all night trying to find the perfect phrasing and then he'd fall asleep on his feet at the shop the next day, and what kind of message did *that* send, that Daniel's dating a guy and suddenly so unreliable? He should just say something.

Daniel smiled up at Mr. Miyagi and tapped the steering wheel; Mr. Miyagi sighed and stepped back.

“See you in a couple days,” he called as he backed out of the lot. “Don't do anything crazy while I'm gone!”

It was a beautiful afternoon. They'd probably have to put the top up for the freeway, because there was a slight chill to the breeze – chilly by Southern California standards, at any rate – but Daniel was okay with that. It would feel cozy, probably. Also: bench seats. Maybe he could persuade Johnny to blow him once they got out of the worst of the traffic?

Johnny was already waiting outside when Daniel came up the street. He sat on the curb with a backpack beside him, arms over his knees and expression distant: absorbed in the pavement below his feet. He blinked and raised his head as the Ford rolled up in front of him.

Daniel threw his arm up over the seat again and bounced his eyebrows. “What's this, a pretty young thing helpless on the side of the road? Can't have that. You need a ride, sweetheart?”

Johnny's mouth twitched. Instead of answering, he pushed up to his feet and tossed his backpack into the backseat alongside Daniel's own

bag. Then he braced his hands over the passenger door and looked down at him.

“I don't suppose I could,” he started.

“Nope,” said Daniel cheerfully. “Get your ass in the car, Johnny. I'm taking you all the way.”

Encino to Mission Hills-Granada Hills

They hadn't been on the road for ten minutes before Daniel was forced to ask – because there was quiet and then there was brooding; having driven a few thousand miles with this guy, Daniel liked to think he could tell the difference.

“You okay over there?” he asked, turning his head and flicking his sunglasses down a critical few centimeters to give him an interrogative look over the frame. Johnny was slouched across the seat, head turned to gaze out the window, but his eyes weren't really moving.

“Eyes on the road,” said Johnny, stirring to reach over and push his cheekbone. “Don't want to crash because you got distracted.”

“Who's distracted? And I'm not going to crash, I would never risk the Ford like that.” He said this last part mostly to get a reaction and was not disappointed. He grinned and relented, returning his eyes to the traffic. “Seriously though,” he continued. “What's up with you?”

Johnny shook his head. “Nothing.”

Right, nothing. What else did he expect. As if he didn't look so sad, it had wiped all five joking-not-joking suggestions about blowjobs from Daniel's mind. And he'd thought long and hard about those.

“You nervous about meeting my mom?” he asked, thinking: yeah, you probably should be. Hell, Daniel kind of was, and he knew the woman.

Except Johnny shook his head and shrugged and said almost absently, “No, parents usually love me.” He didn't notice the face of supreme disgust Daniel made.

“...Okay, leaving that aside,” he said, because *seriously*, “I can tell something's bugging you, so c'mon. Spill. We have like three and a half hours ahead of us, you might as well give in now.”

He glanced between the road and Johnny, watching the other boy open his mouth and then close it again. This happened twice before he shook his head, licked his lip, and said:

“I – can't.”

If he was anyone else, Daniel would counter with *can't or won't?* But he was Johnny, so Daniel bit his tongue and watched the road for a few seconds, mulling it over.

Was he still bothered by the fight? Had Daniel not been convincingly confident that it was all handled? Or was this a stepdad thing? A dead sensei thing? Or maybe Daniel was overthinking this: maybe the job search was getting him down. Not everyone took to employment hunting with the same kind of esprit de corps as the LaRussos. Johnny was kind of down a few in mentors or advice-givers; it was probably easy to get discouraged.

“Sorry,” said Johnny abruptly. Daniel blinked over and found him looking straight ahead, jaw tight with frustration.

“Hey, it's not a big deal, man,” he said. He whispered a mental apology to the Ford and took his hand off two o'clock to grab Johnny's. He laced their fingers together. “Whenever you can, just – let me know. I'll be here.”

Johnny looked down at the interlaced hands. He squeezed Daniel's hand and nodded.

Daniel waited a respectful amount of time, occupying himself with watching the traffic and thinking about the light swipe of Johnny's thumb over the pulse at his wrist. Finally, he could not control himself.

“What do you mean by *parents usually love you?*”

Mission Hills-Granada Hills to Santa Clarita

The thing about meeting parents was, *apparently*, Johnny was “good” at “it”. Mothers sigh and coo over his muscles, fathers shake his hand! Everybody likes having Johnny Lawrence around for supper. If he's a friend, he should be the kid's *best friend*. If he's the boyfriend, well, why don't we get a start on those wedding invitations now? Just in case. And better put down a deposit on the right venue, you know how those get booked up.

“You're being really weird about this,” said Johnny.

“I'm not being weird,” said Daniel to the road. He felt indignant, and that was perfectly understandable; of course Mr. Golden Locks over here found it easy to talk to parents. Of course.

“And I don't get the problem here, isn't this a good thing?” continued Johnny, squinting. “I mean, it's *your* mother that I'm about to meet. Don't you want her to like me?”

“Of course I do. That's not the point.”

“Isn't it?”

Daniel decided to change the subject. “Did it ever occur to you that meeting a guy's mom might be different?”

Johnny shrugged stubbornly. “A mom's a mom,” he said, and before Daniel could work out if this was a brilliant relativist philosophical stance or in fact, incredibly dumb, he added, “And if she's cool with the guy thing, then that seems as good a sign as any.”

Daniel opened his mouth but then hesitated. Critical error; Johnny noticed.

Oh, did he notice.

Johnny turned bodily in place, knee sliding onto the seat and arm coming up to rest along the back stretching towards Daniel's head, but like, not in a sexy way? More like in a vaguely ominous way.

“Daniel,” he said. “You told your mom about us, right?”

“I was getting around to it,” he said, evasive.

“You fucking hypocrite.”

“Whoa! Hey now—”

“I can't believe you," he said flatly. "All that crap you said back in September, about trusting my mom, giving her a chance, and this whole time you're actually a chickenshit?”

Daniel put up a hand, forestalling and a little impatient. “Okay, it is *not* like that. I got busy, alright, and it never seemed like the right moment to have the conversation. Get off my back.”

“*Busy*,” repeated Johnny, shaking his head.

“Happens to be the truth,” he said, annoyed. “And I do trust my mom – she's not gonna care about the guy thing, alright,” probably? Like he was ninety percent sure here. “Look, there were these old queens who lived below us back in Newark for several years, and she was always real friendly with them. They even had our spare key for a while.”

“Crap, you're just talking crap. Like you always do.” Johnny shook his head; despite his fairly standard shit-talking words, Daniel suddenly realized he actually looked genuinely upset.

His stomach gave a wild swoop. He glanced a little frantically between the road and his boyfriend. “Well, look – we're going up there right now, aren't we? I'm telling her today?” he said, cajoling.

“You don't have to. I mean, it's not like I don't get it,” he said, and the worst part was, he sounded like he meant it; he wasn't even trying to guilt Daniel over it.

Daniel almost pulled over to the side of the road, because he thought this situation could do with some assistance in the form of strategic straddling and tactical kisses. But there were two lanes of traffic between him and the shoulder, and he didn't much want to go through all the effort of getting out of the middle lane now that he was there.

What could he say that would fix this? If he explained about the awkwardness of telling one's mother you're dating the guy who used to give you black eyes, Johnny would stiffen up even further. If he admitted that maybe, yeah, sure, he was perhaps a little, *ever*-so-slightly worried about the guy thing, Johnny would act like Daniel had lied to him this whole time. Put on airs or something.

He chewed his lip and thought: there was really nothing else to be

done. He'd have to use the one and only remaining card in his deck. He said a quick mental apology to his mother and every female ancestor going back the past few generations and said loudly:

“Look it's the Italian mother thing, okay?”

Johnny raised his head and looked at him, completely confused. Oh, these West coast types. They had no clue.

“I didn't want to tell you because I didn't want to scare you off,” he said earnestly. He flapped his palms over the steering wheel. “But Italian moms, they can be pretty intense. They get jealous over girlfriends, super critical... it can be a lot to deal with.”

“But I'm not a girlfriend,” said Johnny after a moment.

Daniel paused. “No,” he said, slowly: uncertain where this was leading. It was like playing chess with a blindfolded man who didn't know the rules but somehow kept winning. “You're not?”

“So if this is one of those weird sexist things, then it's fine," continued Johnny. "I'm a boy, so I'm immune to all that. So we're back to her probably loving me.”

And with this bold conclusion, he shuffled back to sitting forward, legs sprawling wide. His arm over the seat melted from tense and threatening to infuriatingly comfortable.

Daniel didn't know which he wanted to do more: crawl onto his lap and rub up against him like a cat or shove him out the door of the moving car. He narrowed his eyes at the road. He wondered if it was a bad sign that they'd barely reached Santa Clarita, and he already wanted to turn around.

Santa Clarita to Castaic

Sometimes when he checked his rearview mirror while shifting on the seat, he caught a glimpse of the bruising on his face, and he internally winced. That wasn't going to go over well. Paired with Johnny's own badges, his mother was probably going to leap to some assumptions. She was going to have a freaking field day with this.

Maybe he'd be more confident about this whole thing if Johnny was someone else, some other guy, but then he'd be just *some guy*, not Johnny, and Daniel was pretty sure this whole thing wouldn't even be happening.

Their past was an essential component to their present – not just in the logic sense, blah blah causation or whatever, but in the sense that when Daniel looked at Johnny, his mind couldn't unwrap the part of the other boy that liked being spooned sometimes from the part that had once knocked Daniel to the ground, the part that hurt someone else just a couple days ago. Or maybe, not that it couldn't but it wouldn't; Daniel didn't want it to.

This was the biggest thing I've ever done in my life, he said to Mr. Miyagi, back when they first opened the long-sitting letter about the All Valley. But it wasn't just about winning, it was about having *proof*: proof he could endure and change; proof that he could look back afterwards and follow the line of it, that he could grow and still recognize himself. A change on his own terms, not the world's.

And maybe that went for Johnny too.

Their beginning will always have been a tangle of anger and awe and fear and glee, and over all of it a determination to be better than the other boy. Daniel hadn't realized it last year but he's older now: better than winning was leaving a mark. He and Johnny will have always changed each other and there's a bond in that, a knowledge they'll always share.

But how was he supposed to even begin to explain that to his mother?

Castaic to Wheeler Ridge

“In Cobra Kai, every year,” said Johnny abruptly, “we'd do this – thing, Sensei would rent a couple vans and drive us to this forest out near Morgan Hill. Coyote Creek.”

“Don't think I know it,” commented Daniel, who was trying to find the sweet spot between conversational and letting Johnny talk.

Johnny sat up in his seat and rubbed his hands down the thighs of his jeans like he was trying to wipe something from his palms. “Pretty hilly terrain, and the woods can get really thick in parts. Anyway, the rules were simple – two teams, last team with a man standing won.”

“Oh, like Capture the Flag?”

“Not,” said Johnny, “like Capture the Flag.”

Daniel decided not to say anything more. After a second, he reached and twisted the radio low. He glanced at Johnny, who was staring dead ahead out the windshield, and returned his own eyes to the road.

“Me and the guys – we won every year in high school. Sensei gave us tips on how to track a man through the woods. I don't know, Vietnam shit, I guess. We were good at it, though. Really good.” He paused. “Or the other boys were just bad at running, I don't know.”

Daniel remembered jumping and stumbling awkwardly through a dark overgrown empty lot, heart doing its best to burst out of his chest. He never looked over his shoulder but he remembered the sense of them behind him, gaining ground: the sound of it. Rough whispering weeds and their calls, always just behind him. It felt inevitable but still he ran, because if they caught him—

Johnny said, wooden, “Junior year, we had a new student, a freshman. He was skinny, but real tall. Had just hit a growth spurt that summer, and it was like he forgot where his hands were sometimes. But he never cried. And he was learning, he was gonna be good – some people, you can just tell, they're gonna be good. Anyway, he was funny. The guys all liked him.”

Daniel had a very bad feeling growing in his stomach and throat, and he wondered if it was better to let this continue, if Johnny really needed to get it out – or if he should tell him to stop? Like, whatever

it was, it was over now, so—

“He was pretty fast – those long legs. Last one on the red team alive. Took us half an hour to corner him.”

Daniel's hands were white around the steering wheel. Slowly, carefully, he slid them down – took a page out of Johnny's own book and steered with one hand cupping the bottom, palm flipped up. His left hand he tucked under his thigh, safely out of sight. He thought of a kata and pretended he was about to start one: focused on his breathing.

“When he saw we had him, he tried to give up his headband,” said Johnny, still with that same strange, dead voice. “But that wasn't in the rules. Sensei said no surrendering. A win's not worth anything if it's given. You have to take it.”

He finally fell silent, for long enough that Daniel thought he was done. He risked a glance at him from the corner of his eyes; Johnny wasn't moving. And Daniel should've left it there. He wanted, more than anything, to leave it there.

Instead he asked, “So what happened?”

“I took it," said Johnny.

Enough, okay, that was surely enough—

“And, and the guy?” asked Daniel, almost involuntary. “The guy from the red team?”

“He stopped coming to the dojo after that.” And he finally moved, shuffling his feet and bouncing his knee uneasily. His head swung left and right, like he might see something in the rolling foothills on either side of the freeway. “Sensei said it was for the best. Addition by subtraction.”

Daniel didn't know what to say.

“You need to take this,” said Johnny.

“Take what?” he asked, stomach sinking. He didn't want to take anything, that's not the kind of person he was.

“Daniel,” said Johnny sharply, hand appearing in front of his eyes. He pointed at a swiftly-approaching exit. “Fresno, right? We need to take

Route 99."

"Oh. Right." He brought his hands back up to the steering wheel. He hit the indicator, *click click click*, and took the exit.

Johnny rubbed his mouth with a fist, rough and quick, and said, "We should stop and put the top up."

Daniel nodded. "Okay."

He hit the indicator again, *click click click* suddenly loud in the car without the noise of the freeway.

Wheeler Ridge to Mettler

They're quiet as they pull the Ford's top up and fasten it. Johnny's brow is pinched, a faint frown creasing his face, and Daniel kept trying to think of something to say, but he wasn't finding the words. And with every passing second it felt both harder to let go and more awkward to address. Terrible combination.

Things were different back then, he could say. *You wouldn't do that now.*

Except he remembered Johnny blinking at him from across a stretch of pillow, his hushed voice, painfully sincere: *I'd do anything for you.*

He wished he could know the simple truth of whether Johnny knew what he did was wrong; he wished there was a way he could ask without making a special issue out of it, because what if he did and thought Daniel was doubting him, calling him some kind of monster? (And what if he didn't, what was Daniel supposed to do with that?)

“You need to go the bathroom or anything?” he asked.

Johnny was leaning against the car, forearms braced over the top as he squinted into the distance. At Daniel's question, he looked back at him and shook his head.

They got back into the Ford. It was a lot smaller with the top up. The sound of the road was muted, the landscape went from touchable to just a picture. And every breath they took was one they shared.

Daniel cleared his throat a little and pulled out of the gas station lot.

“Route 99,” Johnny reminded him. His fingers tapped the door restlessly.

“Yeah, yeah.”

He merged onto Route 99 and they slid away from the last of the mountains. The land settled out before them in the valley: flat roads that deceptively assured him he would always see what was coming.

Johnny said nothing for a few minutes and then he twisted around to look at the road around them. Finding no one within several car lengths, he slid off the seat. He turned his knees with some difficulty in the footwell and then he was there right next to Daniel's lap, laying a hand over his thigh and looking up at him.

“Uh,” said Daniel, thinking *really, now?*

Johnny's hand rubbed the inseam of his jeans, his fingers pressing in firmly and sliding up. His eyes were very still in his face, waiting. Expectant.

“Is this going to be a thing with you?” Daniel had to ask, because yeah, maybe he was usually up for it, but jesus, man. “Like, the moment we start talking about you and fighting, you try to distract me because you think I'm always good for it?”

Johnny's lids fell and he ducked his head in what might've been a flinch. His hand was gentle as it folded over his lap. He nosed at Daniel's waist just above where the seat belt crossed his hip.

“Who's distracting who?” he said, low: the words faintly ticklish.

Daniel wanted to press up from the seat but restrained himself, which mostly meant he basically started vibrating in place. “If we die in a car crash because of this, it would make a really bad impression on my mom,” he said shakily.

“So don't,” said Johnny; this guy, so helpful.

Daniel squeezed his eyes shut but only for a fraction of a second. He stared at the road and took a breath and started to say, “Johnny, I don't know,” and Johnny sat back quickly, spine awkwardly slamming into the dash before he could meet his heels.

He wavered there, uncertain and watching Daniel, and what the hell was this, wasn't Daniel thinking about this exact dream scenario literally an hour ago?

“It'll be safe,” said Johnny, his cheeks steadily darkening. “I'll go slow.”

Daniel licked his lip. He checked his mirrors and swore. His right hand dropped to his fly, but before he could so much as thumb the button free, Johnny batted it away.

“Hands on the wheel, man. Eyes on the road. I got this.”

And he sure did.

Mettler to Bakersfield

An incomplete list of things that lasted thirty minutes but felt a lot longer:

Every time Ted Koppel had Henry Kissinger as a guest on Nightline; Ma always refused to change the channel and spent the whole time talking back to the TV like the man could hear her. Daniel didn't get this, because if the man couldn't hear all those folk singers back in the day, he sure as hell wasn't going to hear some mother in a cramped living room in Newark.

Bob Dylan's weird foray into country music with that one *Nashville* album; did the man like being booed? What was that.

When Daniel showed up early to the airport like they told him to and then he was stuck waiting for them to start boarding the flight to LAX. He wandered around the shops but he couldn't buy anything because he spent most of his money on the ticket, and he couldn't eat because he was thinking about getting back to him and how, after endless weeks of his voice quiet in his ear, it was suddenly only a few hours until they'd be together again, and what if it felt different.

What Johnny was currently doing with his tongue. Couldn't – couldn't *strictly* be even called licking, really, because he was pretty sure the definition of lick involved a loss of contact at some point, and Johnny hadn't taken his mouth or tongue away in—

Any episode of the Brady Bunch.

That one time Mr. Miyagi had him practice the crane kick on an old dock strut on the beach until his legs felt like they could barely hold his weight. But by the end he knew the center of himself, could feel it when he moved, could find it without thinking.

When he was sitting on the plane at LAX waiting for them to let the passengers deplane. His knee was bouncing so bad, the old lady next to him who he'd talked to about riding horses (no idea) on the flight over asked *twice* if he needed to use the bathroom, and no, he didn't, he was just thinking about how Johnny was suddenly so close, assuming he hadn't forgot the time and day – which he shouldn't, because Daniel had reminded him the night before, but you never

know, with Johnny. He was thinking about his eyes, and his smile, and his hands, and what if it all felt exactly the same.

What Johnny was doing when he stopped moving his mouth entirely and just rested his head in Daniel's lap, not like he needed to take a break but like he was full and content and could stay there all day, occasionally nudging him back to full hardness with a lazy hum or suck.

Except then Johnny carefully freed his mouth and said, “Your speed's dropping.”

His hands tightened on the steering wheel and he gritted out, “You can't be serious.”

“I can feel it. If you can't drive, then maybe I should just—”

“If you stop now, I will drive this car into the median and hope for the best.”

Daniel ignored the slightly smug look on his face and shuffled down in the seat a little more, widening his legs. His balls were starting to ache; god, maybe blue balls was a real thing? Who got blue balls while receiving a blow job? Only Johnny could turn sex into an endurance test. Well, somebody give Daniel the Presidential Fitness Test blue patch because he was accomplishing something momentous here.

Daniel looked at the passing highway sign. “Bakersfield's coming up," he warned. "More traffic there.”

Johnny nodded. “I do well with finish lines,” he said simply, and bent his head again.

Daniel pounded on the steering wheel, but he didn't let the speedometer dip again.

Bakersfield to Delano

“Maybe,” said Daniel, a little breathlessly, “maybe that was a bad idea.”

Johnny blinked at him. He took a swig of water and swished it around; his pursed mouth was reddened and puffy and yeah, this had been *such a bad idea.*

Daniel put his eyes elsewhere so he didn't crash the car. Pumpjacks going at it in the distance. Flat brown fields. Boy, this part of the state sure was ugly.

He continued, “I mean, you look like you,” he looked like he'd spent half an hour making sweet, sweet love to Daniel's dick, “and what I'm saying is, maybe the timing here isn't right? Maybe I should call her, make some excuse – car trouble! This old car, you know, it doesn't even have a catalytic converter. Who knows what else it doesn't have.”

Between their bruises and Johnny's freshly fucked mouth, they looked like poster boys for troubled youths, everything they probably warn parents about. Except maybe 'family values' types didn't have the imagination to caution mothers about their sons loving to suck dick. It was sort of a niche hobby.

“You don't want me to meet your mom?” asked Johnny and hit him with the sad eyes, oh god.

Daniel's eyes shot wide. “What? No, that's – that's not it. I'm saying maybe we should wait until neither of us has visible bruises? It's a perfectly reasonable concern. Ma worries.” Boy, does she.

“Does she?” wondered Johnny. His arm came up over the back seat, his fingers immediately seeking out the back of Daniel's neck and thoughtlessly brushing the hairline.

“What?” said Daniel, distracted.

“I mean, she let you fight in the All Valley last year. And she let you take off overseas during the summer. Trusted you to get to Jersey by yourself – clearly that was a mistake—”

“Hey.”

Johnny shrugged. “Once we explain about the bruises, shouldn't it be fine? It's not like we were out in the streets fighting random people, though I wouldn't put it past you someday—”

“*Hey*!”

Johnny hand stopped brushing and folded solidly around the back of his neck. He leaned across the seat and said into his ear, “Daniel, it'll be fine,” which Daniel thought was an unfair tactic, what a damn cheater.

Then Johnny dropped the arm and shuffled down on the seat.

“*Again*?” asked Daniel in disbelief. “Johnny, man, I appreciate your enthusiasm but even my dick needs a break after that extended torture session you call a blow job.”

Johnny rolled his eyes and continued arranging – oh, he was putting his head on Daniel's thigh. And closing his eyes.

“I can't handle you driving any longer,” he said, closing his eyes. “Wake me in an hour, or when we hit Tulare, whichever's first.”

“Tulare,” muttered Daniel. “Sometimes I think you ate an atlas.”

Johnny's chest hitched in a withheld laugh. He flicked Daniel's knee cap. “It's been on the road signs since we merged onto 99, dumbass.” He cracked an eye open and looked up at him suspiciously. “You're not going to get lost, are you. If I sleep, I mean.”

“It's a straight shot to Fresno,” said Daniel, offended. “And between the two of us, I'm not the one who got lost off 66.”

Johnny closed his eyes again and turned his face into his leg. “I didn't get lost.”

Daniel nodded out the windshield. “Right, that's right. Deliberate act of sabotage. You just couldn't bear the thought of letting me go.”

His hand crept up to his knee again, but instead of flicking it he just cupped the cap with his palm. “Yeah, you got it.”

Trying to push things with Johnny was pointless; he always ended up going for broke and whipping out the heart-crushing sincerity. Daniel sighed and dropped a hand to his hair and let him sleep.

Delano to Tulare

So Daniel drove with Johnny dozing away, or pretending to, on his lap. And he thought about what made a person who they were.

There were a lot of stereotypes about Newarkers, especially Italian-American Newarkers. No one out west seemed to really know about them, which was refreshing. It had been weird to go from a place steeped in it to the carelessly oblivious golden shores of California. But still, it wasn't the kind of thing one forgot.

What Daniel found himself thinking about was whether he was *the girlfriend*.

You heard about them, sometimes. A sister of a friend of an aunt of a coworker or something like that. Such a pretty girl, so sweet. Started dating a guy in the business and boy, did he treat her like a princess most of the time. But then there'd be some nights, you know how they get.

He knew somewhere deeper than his gut that Johnny would never hurt him, but christ, who hasn't heard that before? So, okay, never mind, never mind that. The more present problem was Johnny hurting someone else.

*Mike looked like the dangerous on*e, he'd said; his brain working off a completely different schema than Daniel's, apparently. And what was that schema? Violence.

(Johnny's head was heavy on his thigh. His breath was slow and steady, and his eyelashes were long and pale and trying to be still as they rested.)

So what did Daniel know, here?

Mr. Miyagi once told him there was no such thing as a bad student, only a bad teacher – but Daniel had started to wonder. At some point, every student became his own teacher – if he went far enough, anyway. Look at Sato, look at Kreese.

But maybe it was like he told Daniel a few weeks ago: the karate root was Miyagi, but the growth was all him. That could explain how Mr. Silver turned out so different than Johnny's sensei, anyway.

But what did that mean for Johnny, who had nothing and no one to guide him? The question gnawed at him; Daniel didn't know what to do. How could he protect someone from himself?

Daniel dropped his hand again from the steering wheel and ran it back through Johnny's hair. He stirred slightly but otherwise didn't react and maybe he was actually really asleep? Incredible.

Tulare to Selma

“You didn't wake me,” said Johnny, a little groggy. Daniel glanced down and noticed his eyes were open and blinking slowly.

“Maybe we haven't reached Tulare yet, ever think of that?” he said, even though they'd passed the small city ten minutes ago.

Johnny levered himself upright but didn't move back across the seat just yet; when Daniel slid him a sidelong look, he pressed a quick kiss to the corner of his jaw, which was very nice, and then he said, eyes down on the dash, *odometer says you're lying*, which wasn't nice at all.

“You're insane, I hope you know that,” Daniel informed him as he returned to the other side of the seat. “Who tracks the odometer of a car they're not even driving?”

Johnny shrugged. “Habit.”

“Mental patient.”

“When's your birthday?”

“I – what?” Daniel looked away from the road. Johnny stared back expectantly. He'd been joking but maybe he *was* crazy.

“Your birthday, man,” he said, trying unsuccessfully to stretch his legs in the confines of the car. His expression was thoughtful, distant. “I was thinking, it's probably something I should know, right? I mean, what if your mom quizzes me? My birthday's in August,” he added.

“I know, Ali said you were one of the youngest in the class,” he said absently. He didn't remember how it had come up, or when. It was just one of those random bits of trivia floating around his head. He kept meaning to joke about Johnny being his younger man. “And my mother is not going to quiz you on my birthday? What is that, even? She knows my birthday, she was kind of there for the whole thing.”

I was in labor for twenty-eight hours and your dad was so nervous he alternated between throwing up and crying – oh you know him, Daniel, such an emotional man, God love him. Useless in the hospital, though.

“Yeah, but like – I should know my boyfriend's birthday.” Johnny squinted at him, suddenly suspicious. “Why don't you want to tell me?”

“Never said I didn't, calm down.” He hesitated; stomach sinking as he thought about the date. It was gong to be right around the— “It's next month. The eighteenth.” Damn, he really needed to look at a calendar now. He put that from his mind and threw Johnny a smarmy grin. “So you got plenty of time to think about what you want to get your older man.”

Johnny's expression flattened, and it was exactly as satisfying as he'd thought it would be.

"No pressure, though," he continued cheerfully, enjoying himself. "Your sweet, young face is enough of a gift just by itself."

Selma to Fresno

“Okay, uh,” Daniel checked his mirrors and let a semi-truck roar past before continuing, “could you reach into the glove compartment, I wrote down the directions on a notepad.”

Johnny obeyed, saying, “Surprised you didn't buy a map.”

“Oh, now he wants a map,” said Daniel to the air.

Johnny rolled his eyes and shut the glove compartment a little harder than necessary, *hey* now. “City's a lot more complicated than a highway,” he said, before looking down at the directions. “You're gonna want to take 180 east.”

“Alright.”

Johnny tapped the notepad against his knee for a bit and then said, “I used to collect maps. When I was a kid, I mean.” Daniel glanced over, mildly surprised, and he gestured with his free hand. His cheeks were slightly pink, like he was admitting to playing dress-up in his mother's clothes or something (hey, Daniel was bored and eight and the cute neighbor girl made it sound really fun, okay).

“Like, uh. You know, like – Triple A maps. Whatever you could grab from a hotel, or what was lying around maybe at a wayside stop. That kind of thing.”

Daniel made a considering noise. “You mean to tell me even before you could drive, you were obsessed with driving?”

“Not necessarily driving, but. Yeah, I guess.” Johnny looked out the windshield. “I'd try to make the maps join up – spread them all out on the floor like they were a puzzle or something. Trace the roads, imagine different places.”

Abruptly, it clicked. Daniel understood what he was hearing; he'd been an only child too, after all.

“I tried collecting people,” he said.

“That sounds illegal,” said Johnny.

Daniel grinned a little and swatted his leg. He explained, “I decided I needed to improve the phonebook for the neighborhood – didn't get

why it had such limited information. I mean, think about it. Sometimes you want to know more about a person than their name and address, y'know?"

"Yeah," said Johnny, shifting.

"So one day, I take the phonebook and start calling up every number, one by one. I made this whole list of questions, like a survey—"

"How old were you?"

"Uh," Daniel thought about it; he had to be young enough to think it was a good idea, but old enough to think up the questions, also it was after his dad died, so: "Nine, I think? *Maybe* ten."

"What kind of questions?"

"God, I don't know. I asked people what their favorite restaurant was – and, okay, I still think that's critical information, the people in a neighborhood deserve to know – and uh, let's see." He laughed. "I asked which way they put the toilet paper roll in."

"Yeah, this sounds like a really important community service you were running," said Johnny. When Daniel glanced at him, his mouth was pursed against a smile; he stopped fighting it when he met Daniel's eyes.

"Okay, I appreciate that?" he said, glancing between him and the road. "But *don't* say it to my mother, she threw a fit when she saw the phone bill the next month."

Johnny nodded solemnly and then abruptly pointed. "Dude. The 180."

"Yeah, yeah. I see it."

SR-99/180 Interchange to the Villa Del Trio

“Okay, okay,” said Daniel, sitting up with a jolt of urgent energy. This was happening. It was going to be fine. It had the potential to change forever his relationship with his mother, and it was going to be just fine. “What did you say? Van Ness?”

“Yeah.” Johnny squinted at him, brow lowering in thought before releasing in realization. “Jesus. You're actually freaking out.”

“No,” started Daniel, annoyed.

“You *are*. You little prick, I can't believe you. Why did you do this if you weren't sure? Are you crazy?”

“I'm allowed to be a little nervous,” he said loudly. “It's totally normal to be a little nervous when introducing anyone to one's mother, that's like, the most normal thing in the world. I'm only human, Johnny. What, you think I don't get scared sometimes?”

“Honestly? No.”

That briefly silenced Daniel. He opened his mouth and shut it again. He glanced over uncertainly, but Johnny wasn't looking at him, he was sighing in irritation and pointing ahead.

“Swear you're trying to miss every exit, man. Van Ness.”

Daniel took Van Ness.

“You know, you don't have to tell her,” said Johnny as they rolled north through the neighborhood.

Daniel peered around, wishing they'd stopped to take the top down again. This felt like the kind of town you were supposed to cruise through. It felt very slow after the freeway, and all the houses were sized for normal people and normal families. It felt like a Californian version of Parsippany; he kind of hated it already.

“Don't be stupid,” he said. “What am I looking for?”

“Hedges. And I'm not being stupid, you're being stubborn. If you're

feeling *this* bad about it, I don't see why—"

"Feeling bad isn't a reason not to do something, that's why." He wondered if Johnny was trying to annoy him into not being nervous. He cast him a suspicious look; was his boyfriend that calculating?

Johnny tapped his fingers over the top of the rolled-down window and widened his eyes back at him.

No, couldn't be.

"It's going to be fine," said Daniel firmly. He took a right on Hedges.

"Yeah," said Johnny, with emphasis. "I think so too."

His mother had moved into a triplex that seemed part of a little colony of other triplexes, so it was basically a triplex with identity issues. The collection of two-story walk-ups gave the impression of a motel someone had taken a chain saw to, and there wasn't even any palm trees out front, just a patch of browning grass edged by red wood chips that were slowly fading from the sun.

Daniel eased the Ford over to the side of the street and cut the engine. They looked over at the buildings.

"Why'd she move up here, anyway?" asked Johnny.

Daniel shrugged one shoulder. "Mid-life crisis?" Then he felt bad. "I don't know, she said she got a job. She seemed excited about it."

"You ever – feel weird about it, though. Her moving away from you and all."

Daniel looked away from studying the parking lot, searching for her car. He blinked down at the steering wheel and thought about it; about Mr. Miyagi who gave him the car, of Johnny sitting beside him in it.

"A little," he said eventually. "But I – I found something in the valley. And I guess she's didn't."

The weirdest thing was how he hadn't really thought about it until now: a lifetime of traveling the same path as her, and he didn't even notice when they diverged. He wondered if she had.

Villa Del Trio, 6 PM

They walked up the center walkway to his mother's apartment, Daniel leading the way and saying:

“I don't know if she's home, I didn't see her car.”

“Don't you have a spare key?”

“How could I? First time I've been here. Maybe there's something under the door mat or a tree pot or something,” because he could see the bonsai Mr. Miyagi had given him the previous year sitting out on a table beside the door on the second floor. The sight of it was reassuring, and he turned his head to point it out to Johnny.

Except then he forgot about the bonsai because at some point while Daniel's back was turned, Johnny had changed.

Daniel turned around and walked backwards a few steps, brow pinched as he tried to work out what was happening here. Johnny's plaid was tucked into his jeans, and he'd buttoned it all the way up before stopping at the last one. And he'd—

“Did you just comb your hair?” he demanded, incredulous. He looked him over like he might find evidence of a pocket comb bulging out of a pocket.

Johnny gave him a weird look. “Yes?”

Daniel reached the steps and took two before turning and blocking Johnny from following. He folded his arms. Johnny sighed and braced his hands on the railing on either side.

“Why?”

“Why, what?” And when Daniel waved a hand demonstratively up and down his person, his face twisted slightly. “I'm meeting your mom. You can't just show up to meet someone's mom without looking right.”

“You let me meet your mom with a black eye!” And he probably hadn't combed his hair either, god.

“That's different, that's you.”

“What's that *mean*?”

“Why are you being so weird about this?” is what he said, instead of explaining.

“I'm not the one being weird. You're – oh my god.”

And suddenly, he understood why Johnny hadn't been worried this whole time. He was one of *those guys*. He was a faker. He probably made careful jokes about how a mom looks like she could be the daughter's sister and offered to do the dishes after a meal; accepted graciously when the mom said *oh no, that's alright, honey*. He probably listened to dads talk about the stock market and Reagan and nodded in clueless agreement.

Johnny stared up at him, expression flatly impatient. Daniel gave him his best revolted look.

“You are not doing this,” he said firmly. “Whatever *aw shucks* golden Californian boy bullshit you have planned, just forget it, man.”

“What are you talking about?” said Johnny, frustrated. He propped a foot up on the bottom step and gripped the bannister hard like he was thinking about doing a vertical jump over Daniel's head to beat him to the apartment door. As if he could (fuck, maybe he could). “This is what guys are supposed to do, this is how it works—”

“I didn't bring you here so you could lie to her and pretend to be someone you're not.”

“I thought you wanted her to like me,” he said, and what was Daniel supposed to do in response to that except jump on him and try to mess up his stupid weird side-parting?

“Jesus!” Johnny stumbled back, arms coming up in belatedly defense.

“If he could have messy hair, then so can you,” shouted Daniel, straining against his blocks to get at his head. He locked his knees around his side as the other boy twisted in the air, trying to throw him off.

“Daniel, get off that boy this instant,” said Lucille, standing a few feet away, holding a brown paper grocery sack.

They froze; Johnny immediately went beet red.

Daniel slid to the ground and tried not to roll his eyes as his boyfriend hastily swiped a hand back over his head, setting his hair to rights.

“Hey, ma,” he said into the silence, “what's for supper?”

Johnny cleared his throat and straightened up, hands twitching like they wanted to check that his shirt was still smoothly tucked in (it wasn't). He attempted a smile and said in an almost unrecognizable voice:

“Can I carry your groceries for you, Mrs. LaRusso?"

Disgusting!

His mom's expression didn't change, except to chew on the corner of her mouth in consideration. She looked at Johnny; she looked at Daniel. Daniel smiled like everything was so, so normal and cool.

“Sure, why not,” she said pragmatically, pushing the bag into Johnny's waiting arms. She turned to go up the stairs, calling back without looking around, “And Daniel, how about you tell me? You're helping cook for your friend, I've been on my feet all day.”

“No problem,” he said cheerfully. He sent a venomous look at Johnny: stupid fake Johnny confusedly holding the grocery bag, and followed her up the stairs two at a time.

Villa Del Trio, 6:30 PM

She lived above a family of six. Her next-door neighbor on the second floor was an elderly man who never talked to nobody, but whose television set could be heard through the living room wall. She'd arranged the shelving of pictures and family relics the exact same as she always did. It all looked like somewhere Daniel could've lived with her, but it was a one-bedroom and the only stuff belonging to him was in the backpack he'd brought.

Opposite the kitchen counter, leaning up against the far wall behind Johnny was a framed landscape she hadn't yet hung, even though it had been months.

“So,” said Lucille, setting an onion and knife on a cutting board in front of Daniel. “You boys want to explain the bruises? Or is this something that happens so often these days, you sorta forget about it?”

Daniel bisected the onion root and said without glancing to see if Johnny looked panicked or guilty, “Break-in at the shop. Guess these guys thought there might be something inside worth stealing. Luckily, we hadn't moved any of the trees in yet.”

“A break-in? I thought you said this shop was in a good neighborhood.” Lucille dug out a can of tomato puree from the grocery sack and reached for the drawer at his stomach. He bowed his back and leaned to let her open it and grab the can opener.

“It is,” defended Daniel. “That's how you know it's a good neighborhood, people come around looking for stuff to boost.”

Over at the kitchen table, where he had been told to sit, Johnny shifted on his chair. Lucille looked up at the movement, and the other boy reacted like her eyes were shooting skewers. He stopped moving, elbows bent a little unnaturally in the air.

“So you got caught up in this burglary too, Johnny?” she asked. It was the first thing she'd said to him after asking if he wanted anything to drink.

“Yes,” said Johnny, folding his hands atop the table and nodding quickly. “...There were three of them.”

“Guess Daniel was lucky you were there to help.”

“Yeah,” said Daniel, seething a little because actually, no, he was still pretty displeased about that, and even more displeased that current circumstances required him to lie and say: “Johnny was real helpful. Could've gone much worse if he hadn't been there.”

Lucille turned around to open the can of tomato puree, and Daniel shot Johnny a hard look, just so he knew Daniel was lying about that last part. Johnny widened his eyes at him wildly, mouth lifting in a slight sneer, which vanished as Lucille turned around again.

“So long as you're not getting into fights. After last year, I really don't think I could take it again.”

His mother was always one tough lady about anything that happened to herself, but acted like him getting hurt was the end of the world; it was just another burden to bear alongside the bruises. Who wanted to feel like the chink in the armor, the weak link. Like when he took a punch, he wasn't just failing himself, he was exposing her too.

Daniel perhaps smashed the garlic with a little too much force. “It's not like last year. Everything's completely different.”

“I hope so,” she said evenly.

“Well, you don't have to hope, because it's true,” he said, matching her tone.

“You're supposed to mince that, not pulverize it. Johnny,” she said, “how's your mother?”

Johnny straightened in his chair again, chin lifting. “She's great.”

Lucille paused. “Daniel told me she was getting a divorce from your stepfather?”

“Yes,” he said after a moment. “That's. Why she's great?”

“Stepdad's a dick,” explained Daniel sidelong.

“Well, power to her then,” she said briskly. “God knows the world doesn't make it easy on single mothers. You sure I can't get you something to drink? I have wine, perhaps a beer?”

“Oh, no, thank you, Mrs. LaRusso,” said Johnny. “I'm fine. I love – water.”

Daniel forced himself to smile between the two of them. He scraped the minced garlic to the corner of the cutting board with a hard thrust of the blunt edge of the knife.

Villa Del Trio, 6:50 PM

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So Johnny,” she said once the onions had started sizzling, “what do you do when you're not giving rides to my son across North America?”

It really did sound like a lot when she put it like that: like Johnny and he had set out to do it, like it was premeditated and not something that just happened, and then kinda kept happening until finally they decided to make it happen.

Except then Daniel remembered Johnny's trick with the gas tank, and the whole Greyhound chase across state lines thing. And he felt a little confused, because those were both Johnny, not him. And Johnny had been the one to kiss him first. *And* the one to—

“I'm. Kinda looking for a job right now,” said Johnny, meanwhile.

Lucille pushed Daniel's shoulders, shooing him away from the stove. Typical: she wants his help but can't stand actually having it. He put his hands up in defeat and went around the counter to sit at the table to Johnny's left.

She said, “Well, I know a little something of that. What do you think you want to do?”

“I,” said Johnny, and no more.

Daniel glanced at him quickly; from this close he could see the depth of his eyes, the stillness of his face, and okay he wasn't a monster, here. He could be supportive, he could totally be supportive. Beneath the table, he hooked his ankle around Johnny's, while aloud he said:

“I keep telling him he should be a long-haul trucker, but he claims he's a one-car kinda guy.”

“Oh, that's right,” said Lucille, turning to stir the saucepan. “I remember that car.”

Too late, Daniel remembered standing with Ali outside the Golf N' Stuff, facing down a gleaming red car full of people, all of them performing the same quick once-over, giving the same stifled smiles

when his mom rolled up behind him. Because life kind of hated Daniel sometimes.

“You should try riding in it sometime,” he said, like he hadn't noticed her tone. His hands restlessly fidgeting and knocking together over the table. “Man! Those leather seats – real,” and Johnny's eyes darted to him and he was right back to thinking about Johnny being the first to make a move: reclining Daniel's seat back and going to town on his dick, and oh god, why did he start talking about this again?

“Comfortable,” he finished, feeble.

Johnny took a long drink of water. He'd nearly finished the glass; it was his second glass. His face was pink again.

“Uh huh,” said Lucille. She looked at Johnny and smiled. “Need more water?”

“Oh, uh – yes, please,” he said. He made to scoot his chair back a little, saying, “But I can—”

“No, no,” she said, waving him off.

He subsided. She went and refilled the tall glass. Daniel's eyes tracked its return journey to Johnny, and he whispered silent condolences to the other boy's bladder.

“So what did you do after dropping Daniel in Parsippany, Johnny? Take in any sights?”

“No, I just – I went straight home. My mom was waiting for me.”

Lucille blinked, checking her automatic nod. Daniel could smell the onions starting to burn and decided he had to abandon Johnny (sorry Johnny), because otherwise they wouldn't have anything fit to eat.

“Oh, Daniel, please. Stop it,” said Lucille, belatedly turning back to the stove.

“*No*,” he said, snatching the wooden spoon before she could grab it. Scepter of power thus in his possession he pointed at her with authority. “You said yourself, you've been standing all day. And I'd just as soon not eat burned sauce, so just – let me, alright. Go sit down and continue grilling my friend, okay?”

Her expression turned sardonic but she retreated to the table. “I'd

hardly call any of the questions I've asked *grilling*. What, can't a woman ask about a road trip? If he tells me which route he took, will he be spilling state secrets?"

"I took I-80 back," said Johnny.

She clapped her hands. "Okay, there, look at that – progress! We took I-80 when we first moved out here," she said to him. "Did you stop and see any roadside attractions?"

"Johnny doesn't believe in tourist traps," said Daniel over his shoulder.

"Actually," said Johnny hesitantly. "I saw Carhenge in Nebraska."

"Of *course* you did," he said.

"It's Stonehenge, made with cars," he said. "I mean – come on."

Chapter End Notes

> Carhenge might not have been built in 1985; wiki says it was dedicated in '87. Please forgive this historical inaccuracy, but I could not deprive Johnny of Carhenge.

Villa Del Trio, 7:15 PM

“Can I,” said Johnny, shifting half off his seat, “can I – use your restroom?” He looked completely normal, if you didn't know him; Daniel was pretty sure he was quietly dying.

She smiled up at him. “Of course, honey – around that corner, first door on your right.”

Johnny manfully escaped to the bathroom without giving any sign that his bladder was interfering with his gait. Daniel would've been prancing like a pony, himself. Guy must've drank almost forty ounces of water. Must be all the driving he did, he learned to hold it or something.

Daniel stirred the sauce and tasted it; he added a little salt. He glanced over his shoulder and met his mother's eyes and froze.

She folded her arms.

His shoulders slumped. He turned away from the stove, catching himself against the opposite counter, hands skating uneasily across the laminate.

“I meant to tell you,” he said quietly, not wanting Johnny to overhear.

“Why didn't you?” she asked.

“I'm telling you now,” he protested.

“Are you? What are you telling me, Daniel?” And when he hesitated, she sighed. A hand came up to rub her temple. “You only ever hide things from me when you're hurt. What am I supposed to think here?”

“I'm not hiding anything, jesus – I brought him to meet you, didn't I? Meet you again, I mean. Properly. And I told you, I'm not hurt—”

“The bruises—”

“That had nothing to do with – with me and him. And,” he added, struck by divine inspiration or, at the very least, a divine encouraging wink, “I suggested us driving up here *before* the fight at the shop. If it wasn't for those guys, you'd be seeing us properly: unblemished and, and cool.”

It wasn't technically a lie, at least not the part about it being all that Mike guy's fault. As for timing – what was a few days in the larger scheme of things? Someday Daniel would be like, forty, and a few days will be nothing.

“Unblemished,” said Lucille slowly, “and cool.”

He sagged against the counter. “Yes?”

Her finger pressed harder against her temple. “Daniel—”

“Uh,” said Johnny, appearing on the edge of the room again.

He'd changed again, Daniel noticed. His shirt was untucked, sleeves rolled. Maybe he took a look at himself in the bathroom mirror and had a crisis about looking like a dick; maybe he realized his little strategy wasn't working the way he'd hoped.

Anyway, he looked like Johnny again: large and steady and waiting for Daniel to finally make a move. But maybe never expecting it.

Daniel's nerves jumped like they always did before a fight. He straightened up from the counter and threw his hand out like, behold.

“Ma, meet Johnny Lawrence, a boy,” and what a boy! “who... I am,” say it, just say it? it's not a big deal, or it shouldn't be, and if it is maybe that's okay too, but just fucking *say* it, man, “...dating.”

Johnny's eyes widened. He glanced between them quickly. He put his hands in his pockets and tried to smile at Lucille, who dropped her hand to cup her chin and said a little dryly:

“Hello, Johnny.”

She did not appear in imminent danger of bursting into tears.

“Hi,” said Johnny.

Villa Del Trio, 8:05

“This is really good, Mrs. LaRusso,” said Johnny.

“Hey, I did most of it,” said Daniel, and ducked his head as Lucille reached over thwap him.

“And who taught you?” she said tartly. “I'll take possession of the compliment, thank you. And – it is good, Daniel. I'm glad you haven't lost your touch. I worry sometimes. Mr. Miyagi – lovely man, but I worry he is too eager to cook for you. It'd be shame to raise someone to be self-sufficient only for him to stumble five feet before the finishing line.”

“I do the dishes,” defended Daniel. “We run a very equitable household. And I tried cooking once, but he did *not* like what I did to that fish. Man's so damn picky about some things—”

“Think you could teach me?” said Johnny abruptly. Daniel and Lucille looked at him in surprise, and he shrugged and fiddled with his fork, twining and unwinding strands of linguine through the sauce. “Me and my mom, neither of us really cook.”

“You want me to teach you to cook,” said Daniel, and something in his voice must've given him away because Johnny actually rolled his eyes before he could remember to be too awkward not to. “No – no, that's great. Yeah, I can teach you. I'm an excellent teacher, just you wait. Under my tutelage you're gonna blossom into an amazing chef. Maybe you'll even find a calling in it, who knows. People will come from far and wide to dine at *Chez Johnny*—”

“Shay,” said Lucille.

“Say what? Anyway, Johnny, when they do, be sure to tell them where you learned it all, okay? Actually – no, I don't need credit, I'll just take a meal on the house.”

He wondered if there were Miyagi-style chores he could make Johnny do, to get him accustomed to the rigorous duties of the kitchen. Maybe Johnny didn't even need to find a job, maybe he could just become Daniel's house... what would the term be, here—

“So long as I don't start making dinner super late,” said Johnny, who would probably put him in headlock if he realized what Daniel was

thinking. Never mind making a good impression on his mom, he'd kill him for sure; he'd probably be really sad about it, but it'd be one of those *had to be done* kind of situations, like with Michael Corleone and Fredo.

He blinked and realized what Johnny had just said.

“Anything before nine's not late,” said Daniel dismissively; his mother nodded in agreement.

Johnny shook his head and went back to eating.

E Hedges Ave, 9 PM

After dinner, Lucille suggested they go on a walk around the neighborhood, and Johnny suggested he hang back at the apartment to “read”, which led to Daniel suggesting that he really didn't have to keep pretending, at which point Johnny looked like he wanted to shove him. But he didn't shove him because he was still pretending a little. Maybe that was okay, maybe that's what people had to do sometimes. Daniel didn't think he'd ever be very good at it, himself.

So anyway, they went on a walk.

The street was quiet, all the people shut up in their houses and apartments already. Once in a while, a car came down the wide lane, the beams of its headlights making layers in the shadows they passed through on the sidewalk. But they always kept going and in seconds Daniel and his mother would be alone again.

“Well, what do you think?” said Lucille.

Daniel thought about it. Parsippany, except all family and friends are even further away. Don't say that. “Uh, it's – I mean, I haven't really *seen* it yet, but—”

“Yeah,” she sighed.

“Hey, seems like you're not too far away from like, restaurants and stuff,” he offered.

“Is that all I have to say for myself,” she wondered, craning her neck to stare up through the tree branches. “I'm not too far away from restaurants and stuff.”

“How's the job been?” He looked at her dissatisfied expression and winced. “Yeah?”

“The promised promotional path is beginning to look more like a labyrinth.”

“Well, okay – look, why not just move back down to the valley? Or LA, even. Plenty of jobs there.” And when she didn't respond, he said, exasperated, “Ma, why'd you even move up here in the first place? Seventeen years you were fine back home—”

“Nineteen.”

“Thanks for helping my argument. Almost *twenty years* you were fine living in the old neighborhood, the same building, and now you can't stay in any town longer than a few months?” They reached the corner of the block and he stopped walking, and not just because there was a car approaching. “What's going on with you?”

“Listen to him,” she said to nobody. “Daniel, sometimes I think it's a damn shame my mother didn't get to meet you, I would've loved to see you give *her* the runaround. You brought a *boy* home, you're out in the world apparently experimenting with your sexuality, and somehow you're the one interrogating me?”

“Wait your turn,” he said mildly, hoping his flush wasn't visible in the dark. “Johnny's not going anywhere.”

For some reason, this made her laugh. She reached for his arm and tucked it under her own, and they crossed the street.

“Such confidence. Just like your dad – you'd think it would've made me want to smack him, but somehow I always ended up laughing instead.”

“You like to laugh,” he agreed.

They walked for another half block before she said, “I'm tired, Daniel.”

“Oh,” he said, a little surprised. “We can turn back?”

She shook her head. He watched her eyes travel over the neat row of houses along the other side of the road. When they caught the streetlight, he could see they were shining, and his stomach dropped at the sight.

“I mean,” she said, “that's why I moved up here. Why I moved us out to California in the first place, really. I'm just, so – tired.”

He brow lowered. “Oh.”

Her hand tightened on his arm, and her smile turned almost apologetic, which he didn't get until she spoke again, voice a little strange, but not a stranger to his ears, because:

“I thought, maybe – if I went somewhere he'd never been, I could be someone he never knew." The smile widened, tightened. "Someone new, you know?”

Daniel didn't know what to say. He never did, not about this. He ducked his head and kept walking. After another half block, though, a thought occurred to him, and he was kind of helpless not to voice it, but only because he thought it would make her laugh, maybe. It was worth a shot.

“Feel like if you wanted to be someone new," he said in an undertone, like: *not for nothin*, "maybe you coulda set your sights higher than someone who lives in Fresno.”

(She laughed.)

Villa Del Trio, 7:30 AM

Between his disquiet over his mother's problems and odd lingering nerves about – everything, really – he didn't fall asleep for hours. He stretched out on the floor beside the couch, thoughts racing and turning back on themselves, his body growing tender with fatigue.

(He'd argued with Johnny for damn near half an hour about who should take the couch, and only won by throwing himself on the floor and daring the other boy to try and fight him. His mom had already told him she couldn't summon an opinion about who should get the couch, so she was no help, but Johnny didn't know this. Anyway, Daniel won that fight.)

He still woke up early enough to get up and put on the kettle for coffee. Johnny, of course, didn't so much as twitch on the couch.

“Oh, bless you,” she said, shuffling into the kitchen. Her hair was up in a towel and she was wearing sweatpants.

“When's your shift start?” he asked.

“Too soon.”

He jerked his head back. “I'll take care of breakfast, go ahead and get ready.”

She pressed a quick kiss to the side of his face and slipped back out of the room. He dug through her fridge for eggs; scrutinized her bread before putting a couple slices in the toaster.

When she emerged again fully dressed eight minutes later, he had scrambled eggs and toast plated and waiting and was already tucking into his own: hey, eggs cool fast, okay?

“You look tired,” she observed sympathetically, piling the eggs onto a triangle of toast. “Rough sleep on that floor?”

He lifted one shoulder. Paused and thought about it and said, “I wasn't – sure how you'd react. To Johnny and me, I mean.”

She chewed and watched him. After swallowing, she said, “To be honest, Daniel, I don't know how to react.” She paused, brow pinching a little, and reached to touch his chin: the side that wasn't bruised. “But you know I love you, and nothing can change that?"

“Yeah, I know,” he said automatically. It wasn't that, he didn't think. “It was more like – how you'd see me, after. Because of everything that happened last year, I mean. Like maybe you thought you raised a certain kind of person, someone who could look after himself, and now you're wondering, oh, who's this doormat? Or something.”

“*Doormat*?” she laughed. “Don't try to put words in my mouth, Daniel, you're not good at it. I mean, what're you telling me happened here – I raised an Italian man who actually knows how to forgive and let something go? That's nothing to be ashamed of.”

He shrugged and looked down at his half-eaten plate of food.

“From my end, I just don't know if I can keep up,” she continued, more careful. “This past year, there's been Ali, Kumiko – remember Kumiko, you told me she was going to move to America for you, remember that? And now Johnny? Seems like more drama in your life than you need, fresh out of school.”

And she didn't even know about most of the karate stuff, he thought. Sheesh.

“This is different,” he said.

She flipped a hand, a wordless question. He shoved his plate away and leaned his forearms on the table. That feeling from the night was back: his pulse was up and his thoughts were racing around like pests taking the chaos route to avoid being caught.

“It's like – with, with Kumiko and Ali, you know,” he said, “I was thinking about the present. Nothing but the present and how much I liked them. How much I wanted them to like me. I was excited and, and *happy* – and I'm all that with Johnny,” he added quickly, because Jesus, this suddenly sounded way darker than he meant, and it wasn't like that, it was just – “But now, y'know, high school's over. And I'm thinking: wait, this is – I mean, it's always been real, it's not that it hasn't, but now I'm thinking about the future all the time, and.”

“Daniel?”

“I'm scared,” he said.

It came out quietly, almost soundless. It felt like copping to a murder rap, or like how he'd felt the first time he knelt in a confessional after his First Communion, which had also been one of his last, because his dad got sick not too long after. He remembered the darkness of the

booth, the sound of the priest's breathing and realizing with a bolt of pure panic that he didn't know what to say – like he was so behind on accounting for his sins, he'd already lost track of them, sort of like how he was always losing his pencils and notebooks at school so his mom had to keep replacing them, and maybe carelessness was a sin?

“Tell me what scares you,” said Lucille.

“I don't know,” he said honestly. “That I'll screw things up? That he'll get hurt, or maybe – I'll lose him.”

“Oh boy,” she said, leaning forward to put a hand on his arm. “Daniel, take it from the woman who lost your dad – you don't want to waste a moment you actually have with him on worrying about that.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I know.” But that was easier said than done, and she didn't know about the All Valley thing, or the Mike thing, or even about Cobra Kai, really; he'd never told her about the agreement Mr. Miyagi made with Sensei Kreese the previous year. She would've flipped out.

She touched his chin again, tipped his face like she wanted to inspect it for dirt. But she was just looking him over, like maybe she could see the changes taking shape on his face.

“You like him that much, huh,” she said, sounding almost surprised.

And maybe Daniel couldn't beat all the karate dicks in the world, maybe he couldn't stop Johnny from fighting or hurting himself. But he could do this, at least:

“Ma, I love him.”

He went red immediately, but he didn't look away from her eyes. He wouldn't feel embarrassed or ashamed if he was talking about Kumiko, after all, or Ali. He'd want her to know. He'd hardly be able to wait to tell her.

“Oh, sweetheart,” said Lucille.

Johnny, 9 AM

Daniel took a long shower, not really thinking about much. He felt strangely calm, like all his worries and anxiety had emptied from his body down the drain, leaving nothing but a weightless clarity. He haphazardly toweled himself dry, not bothering to get his upper back or lower legs.

From the small bathroom window, it looked like it was going to be a nice day outside.

Johnny's left leg was kicked out from under the blanket and bent: well-muscled and hairy calf hanging down off the couch, making his lap a nicely wide, weight-bearing perch. At some point he'd decided his pillow served better as a face mask. He was perfectly still, absolutely dead to the world.

First time Daniel saw him like this, he'd felt weird looking. Like it was a secret or something. Just – Johnny Lawrence, king karate and all that. He'd always been so tense. Even when he wasn't punching someone or looming, or staring Daniel down or whatever, he seemed completely unreachable. He was a different sort of unreachable when asleep; at the time, stranded in the desert next to a broke-down car, Daniel had felt almost alone.

Normally he liked this part. Whichever way Daniel decided to play it, it was all good: fun to tease him awake, better to do it slow and watch him surface, that tectonic shift of *Johnny* and how he wasn't there until he suddenly was, until his fingers twitched and his eyelids fluttered and he groaned something like, god, can you not? But his eyes were always warm when he opened them.

That morning, Daniel dithered. He knelt on the edge of the couch at his hip and considered opening the living room blinds, or at least twisting the wand to let some light filter in. In the end, something stopped him. He liked the privacy.

He lifted the pillow and tossed it down to his own makeshift bedroll on the ground.

No movement from Johnny, not even a flinch at the eyes. Truly incredible. Daniel had his work cut out for him. Luckily, he'd been trained to be persistent.

Mouth pinching slightly on a smile, he tugged at the blanket twisted around the other boy's body, freeing most of it and throwing it over the back of the sofa. Nothing. A corpse. (A really hot corpse.)

Daniel breathed out a slight laugh and gave up, swung his leg over and lowered himself on top of him. Johnny was sleep-warm and so very solid.

He folded his hands over Johnny's chest and rested his chin on them for a while. Johnny's heart thumped beneath his arms, a slow and strong beat. Daniel knew he wasn't exactly heavyweight material but surely....

Nope.

Alright, well—

“Johnny.” He reached up and pressed a kiss to his lax lips. “Hey, hey. Johnny.”

For several (long, *so* long) seconds: nothing. And something stirred somewhere down there. Daniel couldn't even tell if he actually moved or if he was just picking up on seismic vibrations from deep within the earth.

He pressed another kiss to his mouth and squeezed his hand between their bodies. Johnny was hard, the fabric of his boxers rucked high up along the crease of his thighs. It took no effort at all to bypass the cotton and mold his hand along his length.

The knee hanging off the couch twitched and knocked against Daniel's thigh.

“Johnny. Wake up, man." He kissed him again. "I need you.”

Johnny woke up.

Johnny, 9:05 AM

A few things happened in quick succession: Johnny's arms came up, automatic and heavy with sleep, and his hands traveled down Daniel's bare back until they hit paydirt and dug in; Daniel reflexively tightened his grip on his dick, and they jolted against one another; Johnny quickly shook the sleep off and his eyes widened and he said, half-panicked, *wait, are you – ?* and *jesus christ* and then he frantically tore the blanket off the back of the sofa and threw it over Daniel.

His whole world went dark. Daniel made an annoyed sound and let go of Johnny's dick.

This wasn't at all hot.

“What's your *problem*, man?” he said, poking his head out of the blanket.

“You're naked,” said Johnny, as if he hadn't returned his hands to Daniel's ass the moment he was done shrouding them in the deep funk mystery of his ma's most recent thrift store duvet.

Daniel propped his head up on his elbow and chewed his cheek, considering. “Not the reaction I was hoping to provoke, but okay, I suppose you're a little out of your element here.” As he registered Johnny's lingering bodily stiffness, he rolled his eyes. “She went to work, jackass. You think I'd climb all over you if she was about to walk into the room?”

“I don't know what you'd do,” said Johnny darkly, and this was no good, he was doing that *thing* – that thing where he pretended he didn't need this and was just tolerating Daniel's sex frenzy because he was, what, a real nice guy like that?

Johnny Lawrence, so selfless and removed! He was so generous, he'd open up a charity giving out orgasms to the needy. (Okay, but if prostitution ever became legal, could one donate services? Like a lawyer doing pro bono work? And would that be tax-deductible?) Daniel could see it now: the martyred look on his face as he opened the fly of his jeans, the beatific smile as he offered his dick in benediction. (What, suddenly this was a religious charity? That'd be one way to get the youth of America back to church.)

Daniel considered the hand still warmly cupping his ass. Johnny didn't

seem interested in moving it, but he also looked seconds away from deciding to shut his eyes again – now that he knew they weren't seconds away from being caught together, after all. Not happening, he decided; at some point, Johnny fell under the delusion he was in charge, and okay, Daniel thought it was pretty cute sometimes. But – enough, okay.

Johnny's brow lowered. “Why are—” His eyes went wide. “Wait.”

Daniel spread his knees wide over his lap, slowly and deliberately bearing down against him. Johnny's fingers faltered and tightened, like he couldn't help it, and that's what Daniel wanted. He wanted him helpless not to.

“Johnny,” he said, and the other boy started shaking his head, *no*, so Daniel took his mouth in a firm kiss. He got a hand against his face to hold him still and Johnny immediately opened his mouth for him, silent but for a ragged intake of breath before he took him deep.

Then Johnny turned his head, breaking the kiss, and said with difficulty, “No, it's – it was supposed to be—” *nice*, he could hear him say: *good, romantic*, and Johnny was so silly sometimes. Like it could be anything else, when it was him, when it was them.

Johnny's hand was still curled around the crux of his thigh. He was hot and hard next to Daniel, and it was agonizing to think of going another minute not knowing what it was like to take him inside.

He was coming to him in the house of his mother, though it wasn't even hers, not really. It was no place Daniel knew or would have any reason to think about again, and that's how he wanted it. In his memory of this moment, he didn't want to think of the feeling of the Avanti's leather seats against his bare skin, or the way the garden light came through the window in his room back home. He wanted nothing to remain but Johnny.

“It will be,” said Daniel, pressing his forehead against his jaw and breathing him in, the sweat in the crease of his neck. He reached back and guided the other boy's hand up, shuddering as he was spread. He said, more desperate, “Johnny, it is. It always is, with you.”

Johnny flexed up against him in small, unconscious motions. Daniel deliberately pressed back against his fingers, eyes shutting against the intrusion.

“*Please*,” said Daniel, and Johnny took his fingers away.

His arms came around him like iron bars and he twisted them off the couch. Daniel didn't have any breath to lose in the impact. His legs fell wide and he reached out but it was unnecessary – Johnny already had him.

Daniel, Forever

There was no telling what would remain: which details he'd remember and what would be there and gone, his to have but not to keep. Maybe some part of him would recall how Daniel sounded, at the end. Like that split second after the guitars have riffed and the drums have pounded and you can still feel the echo of the bass in your ribcage. The song is over but you're still living in the space that grew in your head for it. If Johnny could just have that, maybe.

Daniel said *you look like you're trying to diagnose an engine problem* and *you know what? I'm so messed up over you, that seems almost romantic* and *hey, while you're down there, wanna check my oil?* The magazine had said it was important to resist the instinct to tense or clench down, but Daniel didn't seem to have that instinct. Daniel spread his legs over Johnny's seiza-bent knees with a sigh and opened for him like it wasn't even a question. Some questions have answers and Johnny thought many maybe didn't, but he didn't have to wonder in this case because everything in Daniel's body was telling him, yes, you.

Johnny swore Daniel actually relaxed into it. He was somehow already wet. Oil levels? he thought wildly.

Here was one thing Daniel never said, except for the million ways he was always saying it: he wanted to be known. He gave bits of himself away to Johnny like someone sharing air underwater; at some point there might not be anything left and it was either they both surface or drown. But fuck if it didn't feel amazing to sink together into the cool dark for a while.

Daniel's elbows shook and collapsed out. He fell back against the rumpled bedroll, chin tipping up to suck in air. “You're?” said Johnny, knuckle-deep and it had been so easy; he pressed in and up, and Daniel twisted against his hand, blinking rapidly. And it was so easy. *In the shower. Earlier.* While Johnny had been sleeping, then; his brow pinched. “Why didn't you let me?” Daniel's hands fumbled up Johnny's sides, mindless stroking: at once a greedy grasp and clumsy comfort. *Didn't mean to do it, I'm sorry, I was thinking about you. Always think about you – like, the day you left Parsippany, I—*

Almost three thousand miles, and not one of them had passed without him thinking about Daniel. In Iowa, he parked in a hay field and wrapped himself in Daniel's blanket and looked at the stars and

wondered if Daniel could see them that same night through the light pollution that seemed to cover so much of the east coast, and then suddenly there was this massive cow nosing up through the darkness behind the driver's seat and he maybe screamed, but no one was there to hear it so it didn't count. Except the cow. The cow definitely heard it.

You're not going to try having sex fully dressed, are you? "What? Oh," he said, almost surprised, like he'd forgotten his own dick: straining against his boxers and spot-darkening the grey cotton. Daniel didn't try to help him strip; he just tucked his hands behind his head and watched, knees crooked.

The thing was, Johnny never hesitated, not with his body. If it got that far, his mind was already made up; he did his thinking beforehand. And he'd been thinking about this for a while. He wanted it to be good for Daniel, but also – he just wanted Daniel. And Daniel was telling him he could have him. Years of denial, of being undeserving, unworthy. He always thinks if he keeps his eyes closed, the dream might retain its shape for a little while longer. But Daniel said: open your eyes. Daniel said—

Kiss me, Johnny. So he didn't hesitate.

His hair kept falling into his eyes. His back was slick with sweat and Daniel couldn't seem to keep a real hold on it. His body bowed up beneath Johnny, hips straining against his grip. Twin crescents of brown gleamed at him beneath fallen lids: thick, dark lashes trembling and clamping down hard as Johnny pushed in and then Daniel said *thank you*, which was pretty damn weird, but not nearly as weird as Johnny unthinkingly replying, "You're welcome," because those were the manners he'd been taught, and it turned out having someone burst out laughing while you were inside them was kind of—

Daniel took all of him inch by overwhelmed inch, relaxing and clenching in phases. At first Johnny thought he was having a hard time with it (*the magazine said it was important to...*) but no; he wasn't struggling, he was savoring. Like he needed to memorize every last sensation before continuing to the next, and maybe he could, maybe his memory was better than Johnny's.

Johnny went as far as he could go, end of the road, and Daniel's chest hitched. He smiled and his eyes were closed but not like he was asleep. Johnny tried to kiss him carefully, and Daniel immediately opened his mouth and sucked on his tongue and that was when it

really felt like fucking. Johnny was inside him from both ends but Daniel had snuck inside him ages ago, so he was still down a few hundred points, probably. He didn't mind.

Did you know? This whole time did you know? And Johnny didn't know much, but somehow he knew Daniel would be perfect, he was always so perfect for him, so *god, Johnny, you're perfect.*

He knew other things too. He knew (he thought) more than most that you couldn't ever redo the past or undo what you did and you'd think that would make you more careful about what you do in the present, and he was trying to be careful, but anyway, what he could do was give Daniel a reason to feel good, a reason to be happy, a reason to keep laughing at him between the curses and moans. Thrusting helped.

Daniel came first, but he didn't let Johnny stop; with ditzy legs and breathless words, he made his desires known, and it was lucky Johnny understood what he wanted because his direction was for shit. *What are – oh jesus fuck*, and okay, so maybe he hadn't been asking for Johnny to haul his legs over his shoulders? But this was clearly the best option, because this way he didn't risk jostling Daniel's sensitive dick as much, and *you have the best ideas* and yeah, Johnny had the best ideas. Sometimes.

With Daniel sated into a lazy-limbed compliance, Johnny could let go a little. Anything after Daniel coming was a bonus. *I want to feel you.* "Can't you?" because by then, he wasn't exactly gentle; Daniel couldn't just handle it, after all, he wanted to take it. *No, I mean* – and Daniel was red-faced from more than the exertion – *don't pull out, Johnny* and jesus christ how is he always so

Johnny didn't pull out.

He shook and collapsed forward, damn near bending Daniel in half, but Daniel was more than okay with it. He gasped and sighed and then, after long, dragging seconds – he hummed: a single note, clear and sweet, and yeah, that. If Johnny could just keep that, maybe.

Interlude: a glimpse at life on the y-axis

The boy returned to town around noon, according to his employee. (*Boss, they musta been against that fence for half an hour, sucking face. It was disgusting.*)

John arrived at 1600.

If he wasn't already getting revenge, Terry would destroy Daniel LaRusso for this moment: having to admit his failures; having to say—

“Change of plan,” and feel John recede from his arms, head tilted in faint question. His eyes were still warm but they've gone still, and his smile took on a wary, knowing curve. Like he wasn't surprised Terry couldn't fix it, like he'd always known Terry would let him down.

“It's not just him and the old man. You had a student, last year – blond, kinda slow in the head but moves like some kind of hot shot. Name's John?”

John's lids fall in a slow blink. “Johnny Lawrence? He was my top student.” And he said it a little reproving, like he was disappointed to have to remind Terry.

He said, “He's dating the LaRusso kid.”

“No,” John said after a very long pause. “No, that can't be right.”

Why should they get to have that, is what he thought when he first saw them together – shockingly, unthinkingly open about it. From the way the smaller boy knelt beside him on the lawn to the sight of Lawrence cupping his face as he kissed him against the fence – in broad daylight. Right there on the street. Anyone could've driven by, but they were so stupid with it, they didn't care. And what have they suffered, to earn that?

Real love waits for the one kiss out of fifty flinches.

Real love endures the darkness of the 2 AM encounter, the silences

and cold shoulder the day after.

Real love knows what it is to be debased and deranged and *you don't have to do that* like you were trying to do something terrible to him, something disgusting and real love says: I stay anyway. Because out of a world of things he could buy, this was the only thing he wanted.

It was not unlike a mantra about rifles he'd heard the jarheads use years back: the pacing, similar. The unthinking desperate grip, also. *This was his love. It wasn't perfect, but it was his.*

“My student's no faggot,” said John.

“I'm sorry,” said Terry. “But I'm going to fix it.”

Johnny vs The Hard Sell

PART THREE

“Okay, I really have to go,” said Johnny, and then he kissed Daniel again, biting his lower lip.

“...Counter offer,” began Daniel, some time later. He was shirtless again, and any second now he'd probably be out of his jeans too. The button was already freed and the zipper was down, the two sides flopping open and loose: easy access.

“No.” Johnny took a step back, and that step was like something out of World War One, every inch fought long and hard for.

But Daniel followed him; every hard-won inch shrinking and disappearing, and that was probably like World War One too.

“Hey, hey, hear me out,” he said, caging Johnny near the door. If his sensei was anywhere nearby, he might be able to hear them, but Daniel didn't seem to care. “You could stay here? Maybe even stay the night? I'll smuggle you in some dinner like you're a stray kitten I found in the alley behind the laundromat. It'll be perfect, see, because unlike a kitten, you're pretty quiet, so our chances of discovery are basically nil. And even if you are discovered, I very much doubt I'll get the lecture I got back then, and—”

He shook his head firmly, blocking out the chatter. “I gotta go, man. I told Bobby—” but then Daniel was leaning up against his chest: his heel lifting, his knee dragging up Johnny's leg in a silent command; Johnny's arms automatically dropped to grip and lift, and christ.

He turned them and pressed the other boy against the beam next to the sliding door, and kissed him thoroughly for a long moment before saying, “I promised.”

They'd been back a full day and a half and he'd gotten *nothing* done. It was starting to get a little—

Daniel locked his ankles tight around the small of his back and ground in hard against him.

It had seemed so clear-cut, earlier. He was supposed to see Daniel

safely home from the shop, and then he was going to head over to the meet-up with the guys at Bobby's dorm.

“What was it you said the other day?” Daniel murmured into his ear. Johnny clenched his jaw and said nothing. “Twenty minutes, right? Twenty minutes to get me ready, and—”

Johnny lifted him away from the wall just so he could shove him against it again, gently. “It doesn't take twenty minutes to get you ready,” he countered, strained.

Daniel made a noise low in his throat. “I don't think I should be punished just because I'm naturally gifted.”

“Naturally gifted,” said Johnny, and it should come out disbelieving, but it just comes out stupid and kinda breathless, because, “yeah, you were basically made for this.”

And his hand was squeezing Daniel's ass, and he was thinking about how it had felt to be inside him, and how it had continued to feel, watching Daniel fidget and shift on the Ford's old bench seat as he drove them back to the valley; how Daniel had pressed his lips tight every time he popped the clutch; how Johnny had offered to drive if he was that sore and Daniel had said *that's not exactly the problem, man.*

“Made for you, maybe,” said Daniel, mouth curling wide like it always did when he knew he was swinging for the fences in the smarm department, and he barely got the words out before Johnny was crashing into him with another hard kiss.

And how was he supposed to get anything done, anyway? How was he supposed to solve this weird All Valley mystery thing, and how was he supposed to get a job or move forward in life knowing every second of every day that Daniel was here and always five minutes away from being able to fuck himself down on his dick?

Johnny had only one option, and it went against all his training and instincts. He needed to ask for mercy.

“Daniel,” he said, like his hand wasn't already down the back of his jeans. God, how he spread for him. “Please. I promised.”

Daniel dragged his hands up through his hair, nails scritching at the back of his skull, and he sighed gustily. Johnny's hands stilled and he dropped his forehead to his shoulder and sighed back. Thank god.

Johnny vs Demonstrating a Security Weakness

“You know, you could just go out the gate,” said Daniel, following him across the garden. He wasn't speaking nearly quiet enough, and Johnny shook his head into the darkness.

“I'd have to walk past the windows,” he said. He stopped and considered the tree branch hanging over the fence.

Behind him, Daniel said, “Bullshit, you just want to show off.”

He smirked slightly and whirled around, pulling him into a quick clutching kiss before jumping and grabbing the branch. Rough bark dug into his palms, and he took a second to be sure of his hold before pulling himself up.

“Exhibit A,” said Daniel dryly below, craning his neck to watch with bright-eyed attention. “Waste of your time, man. I already know you can perform. You wanna to do something really impressive, you'd come back down here and give me a personal demonstration.”

Johnny twisted his body over the branch. “The only thing I'm demonstrating here is how easy it is to break into this place.”

“Who cares about break-ins, it's the guy breaking out that's giving me grief.”

Johnny shook his head and started edging backwards on the branch towards the trunk.

“I could do that too,” said Daniel, mostly to himself, “I mean, probably. Might have to swing my legs a bit to pull myself up, like a kid on a jungle gym, but what counts here is the end result, and I bet I could get up there.”

“Don't you dare,” said Johnny, who had no desire to fall out of a tree mid-sex.

“Yeah, yeah. Fine, the glory's all yours, for now – hey, Johnny?” he called suddenly, as Johnny shifted over to jump down on the other side of the fence.

He poked his head back around the tree and looked down at Daniel,

who hadn't moved to go back inside. “What?”

His expression was hard to make out in the dark. “Call later?”

Johnny smiled, and he didn't know if the other boy could see it, but he hoped he could hear it in his voice when he said, “'Course, duh.”

And then he kicked away from the tree, and the ground rushed up to meet him.

Johnny vs Waiting, Again

“Why couldn't we meet on my campus?” Jim wanted to know. “It's closer to the valley.”

“Yeah, but you have a roommate,” said Johnny, tapping his fingers over his bent knee. He looked up at the door opposite Bobby's room; someone had drawn a dick on the white board under Zack's name.

“And who wants to plan anything with that weirdo staring at us the whole time,” said Dutch, who was in the process of adding some artistic flourish to the dick.

“Just how hairy are your balls, man?” asked Johnny, because it was getting to be a bit much. The art teacher junior year had talked a lot about the importance of not over-doing something.

“Bet you'd love to find out, you fuckin' fairy,” said Dutch, mouth curling around the marker cap between his teeth.

“Jeffrey isn't that weird, he's just shy,” said Jim, meanwhile.

“He's creepy and probably a serial killer. Bet he watches you in your sleep, I don't know why you stay there. If it was me, I'd put in for a new room.” Dutch paused. “Or beat him up, then *he'll* put in for a new room and you wouldn't have to do any extra work. Even better.”

“I'm not beating Jeffrey up, I think he has asthma. It could trigger an attack or something.”

Johnny and Dutch both rolled their eyes. After a moment, Dutch added a little spritz of jizz coming out the end of the dick. He stepped back, admiring his work.

“Anyone know if Tommy's coming?” asked Johnny, a couple minutes later.

Dutch had lowered himself to sit against the opposite wall, and between the three of them, their legs and expressions made for a challenging gauntlet to any students coming down the dormitory's hallway. At the question, Dutch sneered a little but said nothing.

Jim shifted awkwardly at Johnny's elbow and said, “Uh, think he said he was busy.”

“Right,” said Johnny, gritting his teeth. His hands fisted between his knees. “You told him about—”

“Yeah. But he didn't seem to care.”

Johnny nodded and looked down the hallway at all the open doorways, the meandering bodies criss-crossing and mixing. Some people found it so easy. Maybe he would too, if he lived somewhere like this, where talking to someone didn't have to be a pre-arranged affair involving telephones and driving and schedules.

Speaking of, what the hell was keeping Bobby?

Johnny vs No Problem

“Why are we even here?” said Dutch. Johnny stopped hitting his head back against the wall and looked at him and he continued impatiently, “I mean, why aren't we going back to that dojo and just settling this there?”

“What, you want to break in?” asked Jim, confused but seeking clarity.

“There's nothing to break into,” said Johnny, before this stupid line of conversation could go further. “Place looked empty. It was just – an address to use for the tournament.”

“You don't slap a big fuckin' snake on a building just for a stupid form,” Dutch pointed out.

“Yeah, maybe,” he said.

“Yeah, *probably*.”

He pinched his mouth and shook his head. “Whatever, there was nothing there, anyway.”

Dutch made a fist and hit his other palm with it. “So let's break in and trash the place. Send a message.” And he said it like it was obvious, like they were already weird for having not done it.

“But we don't know who we're sending a message *to,*” said Johnny.

Dutch bared his teeth at him but fell silent; they all fell silent.

Johnny almost pressed his fingers hard into his eye sockets, but he stopped, not wanting to do it in front of the guys. If they were rattled by the idea that Cobra Kai was back, he almost couldn't look at it. It was eating at him. His mind kept circling back and landing on the possibility that Daniel was being messed with as a way to get back at Johnny. He just didn't understand who could be responsible.

“Are we sure Sensei is dead?” asked Jim, as if his mind had been groping along the same dimly lit path.

He shrugged. “Guy said he cremated the body.”

“Yeah, but who was this guy?” said Dutch. “You didn't know him,

never saw him before in your life. Can we take his word for it?"

Jim's back came off the wall as he sat forward, looking a little excited, like he'd found an answer. "Yeah, what his name again?"

Johnny shook his head. "I don't remember." He thought about it. "Tim something? Smith? No. I don't know."

Jim looked disappointed. "Not a lot to go on."

"But he didn't even know who I was, he didn't expect one of Sensei's students to *be* there." Johnny looked between them. "So what's the angle? Why would he lie to Daniel's sensei?"

Dutch flapped his hands over his bent knees. "Hey, look, I'm fine accepting the man's actually dead. Just wish we could get a confirmation."

"We have a name. We know this Mike Barnes guy is somehow connected to Cobra Kai. Now we just got to figure out what his deal is —"

"He's a ringer," said Tommy.

The three of them looked up; at some point during their conversation, Bobby had finally arrived home, and the floppy-haired reason for his lateness was obvious and not terribly happy at his side. Tommy looked at them. He didn't meet Johnny's eyes.

They climbed slowly to their feet. The hallway abruptly felt a whole lot smaller with five fight-ready bodies standing between the narrow walls. Dutch put himself at Johnny's shoulder and shifted on his feet like he was warming up for a match: his eyes flicking alertly over Tommy, his mouth hooking into an automatic sneer.

"Decided to show your face, huh," he said.

Tommy's mouth went tight, and he glanced at Johnny like he couldn't help it. "If it's Cobra Kai business, figured I should."

"What do you mean, he's a ringer?" said Jim from behind them.

"Can we take this inside, please," said Bobby, turning with his key in hand. "I don't want someone calling campus security – Dutch if you try a punch, I will throw you out the window."

Dutch snorted. "You can try." He didn't look away from Tommy.

“What's *your* problem,” he demanded, face twisting.

“I don't got a problem – how about you, you got a problem?”

Tommy didn't glance at Johnny again. He didn't so much as twitch. At his side, his hands were in fists. “No problem here.”

Dutch smiled meanly, all teeth. “Great.”

Bobby met Johnny's eyes and sighed. He shoved the room door open. “Great.”

Johnny vs What He Had To Do

If the hallway had felt small, Bobby's room was like a closet. Dutch hitched himself up to sit on top of the chest of drawers and Jim took the bed while Tommy leaned against the closet near the door. Bobby sat at his desk and Johnny stood by the cracked window beside the bed, because he wanted any air he could get.

“When Jimmy told me the name, I thought it sounded familiar,” said Tommy. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a tightly rolled magazine. It smacked the floor loudly as he tossed it into the middle of the room. “That him?”

Johnny looked down at Mike Barnes's face. It was a black and white photo, taken like he was mid-strike. His eyes were furious but strangely empty too; cold.

“Yeah,” said Johnny.

“*The bad boy of karate*,” read Dutch. He made a rude noise through his nose. “You fucking kidding me? *This* is the guy, Johnny?”

“It's him.”

Jim leaned forward on the bed to squint at the magazine. “This is a full feature article. If he's already in magazines, what's he doing entering the All Valley?” He blinked up at them all. “That's not a professional tournament, there's not even prize money.”

“Yes,” said Johnny through gritted teeth, “that's what I've been saying this whole time. The whole thing is really fucking weird. You agree now? You all see it?”

“And he's from San Francisco, so not even local,” said Tommy, folding his arms and looking at the floor.

Johnny thought about what he'd said. “A ringer. Someone's brought in a ringer.”

He nodded, neutral. “Yeah.”

“Okay, so someone's backing this guy,” said Bobby, drumming his fingers over the back of his chair. “You said there were two other guys at the shop, right?”

“Yeah, but they didn't exactly seem like the brains of any operation. More like they were – back-up. Shitty back-up, Daniel took them both on himself.”

And for some reason his stomach clenched at mentioning Daniel's name so casually in front of them all, but he didn't let the weird feeling reach his voice, and he didn't look at Tommy, not even when he shifted on his feet uncomfortably.

“So we have three new members of Cobra Kai wandering around, a new dojo—”

“Empty.”

“For now,” said Bobby, a warning in his tone. “If this Mike Barnes is so hot to fight Daniel in the All Valley, if he beats him – I don't know, maybe it's a way of drumming up business.”

“I should've taken out his other knee while I had him on the ground,” said Johnny.

Over on the chest of drawers, Dutch crowed and snapped his fingers. “Now you're talking!”

“Johnny,” sighed Bobby, shaking his head.

“What?” he demanded.

“We're not kids anymore," he said flatly. "You hurt someone, you could get into serious trouble. Johnny, you could ruin your life.”

He shook his head, frustrated. “You said it yourself, this might be some kind of attempt to bring Cobra Kai back.”

“Is that such a bad thing?” asked Tommy, and they all looked at him. He clenched his jaw and continued, “If Kreese is gone, then who cares? I mean if,” and he paused and bit his tongue and continued, “if *Daniel LaRusso* isn't fighting next month, then this Mike Barnes guy can just take the title, and what difference does it make to any of us?”

“If that's really how you feel, then why'd you come here tonight?” he asked. Tommy finally met his eyes, and after a long moment, Johnny nodded. “Yeah. Because you're Cobra Kai. We all are.” He looked around at them one by one, and finished with Bobby. “We did some messed up shit with that dojo. And if it comes back, that's on us.”

Bobby stared at him grimly, looking torn. Finally he blew out a breath and said, “So what exactly do you want to do about it?”

Johnny hadn't realized he already knew what he had to do; it was a secret he'd kept from himself until the moment he needed to know it. Because it was easier to pretend he wasn't hiding anything from Daniel if he simply didn't think about it.

“We're not letting this thing get as far as the All Valley,” he said. “We're gonna find these guys, and we're gonna take care of it.”

Johnny vs And Then There Was One

“*Finally*,” said Dutch, "some real action."

“One problem,” said Tommy, “we don't know how to find them. And I'm not going to San Francisco to track this guy's parents down, see if he left a forwarding address.”

Johnny could drive to San Francisco. If he got up early enough, he could even get there and back in a day, and not have to explain to Daniel where he'd gone. Of course, that was assuming he could find Barnes's people quickly once he got there, and there was no guarantee this would be the case. Maybe if he contacted the magazine, asked the author of the article? Would he give out that kind of information to just anybody? Johnny could pretend to be with some karate equipment company, maybe: interested in offering Barnes a sponsorship.

“We already have an address,” said Bobby, meanwhile.

“Yeah, for an empty building,” said Tommy.

“And the ownership of that building should be a matter of public record,” he said patiently. He looked around at them expectantly; they all stared back blankly. He sighed. “So we just need to go talk to the county?”

“Aaand I'm out,” announced Dutch, hopping off the drawers. “Done with all this driving around playing Hardy Boys. You guys let me know when you know where to go, and I'll be there to help deliver the beat down.”

He looked around at Jim, who'd driven him.

“Oh,” said Jim, bumping up awkwardly from the bed. “Right, I guess I – yeah, I have class in the morning, so I should. Go. I guess.” Dutch reached out to take hold of the back of his neck and started hauling him to the door. Jim looked back over his shoulder. “But – same! Yeah, just let me know where to be, and I'm there, and – Dutch, man, take it easy, will you? What's the rush, jeez—”

The door closed behind them.

Tommy looked from the door to Bobby. “I should go too. It's getting

late.”

“If we call you,” said Johnny, straightening up from the wall. “You gonna show? Or are you too busy with your new martial arts buddies?”

Tommy's eyes flicked to him and away. To the wall, he said quietly, “Got get kicked out of MAC training, actually. Turns out Kreese was wrong about the real world not having rules.”

“Oh,” said Johnny, stomach flipping hollow. “Tommy, look, man—”

“Just let me know what you guys find out,” he said, and then he left without another word or look at either of them.

Johnny blew out a breath and collapsed sideways onto the bed. He glared at the ceiling and then angled a suspicious look over at Bobby, who was watching him from his desk chair.

“You're not going to back out too, are you?” he asked.

“How can I?” said Bobby, resigned. “Either I go with you, or I read later about how some guy got arrested threatening to karate chop a clerk down at the Register of Deeds.”

Johnny vs Cacophony in the Dark

It came down to him in cascading layers, like the sound of the pep band at a rally warming up: a discordant swell of brassy, strident noise one could ignore but never fully stop being aware of, though he tried.

He tried.

He tried, until suddenly his mom was in the room by his bed and grabbing the three alarm clocks one by one, all the while yelling. The old wind-up clock was thrown against the wall, where it shivered and dinged a final bell and fell sadly silent. The first digital alarm, the one that was set to screech, was yanked away from the wall so violently the whipping cord came within five inches of his head. The cord of the second digital alarm was stretched tight and long beneath his bed, so Laura had to settle for pounding the top of it until the radio alarm stopped blaring Wham! and with that final move came blessed silence.

Johnny squinted up at her through the darkness from the rumpled bed, confused.

Laura shoved a tangle of long hair away from her face and took a deep breath that did not look nearly as calming as she would like, and she said, “My beautiful son.”

“Uh,” said Johnny.

“Five minutes. Had to be over five minutes, they were ringing. I could hear them through the wall. Why did you set three alarms for six in the morning?”

Johnny blinked over at the wind-up clock in the corner. It looked maybe-broken. “I wanted to get up early?”

This statement seemed to break something in her, because she shouted at him, “So *get up*,” and stalked from the room in a whirl of bathrobe and blonde hair.

Johnny rubbed his face and looked around the room for a bit and finally pushed upright. He reached for the glass on his bedside and downed the stale, lukewarm water. He rolled his head along his neck. Through the window blinds, he could see the sun had not yet risen.

He got off the bed and stretched out and began a set of push-ups.

Johnny vs Adults Drink Coffee

An hour and change later, Johnny walked into the kitchen with his hair still dripping down his bare back from the shower. Laura was at the table reading something; her mug was mostly empty, so he grabbed it to refill. He poured himself some coffee and turned back to the table.

She glanced up as he set the newly filled mug at her elbow, and her mouth twisted slightly. She reached for the coffee and said, serene, “I'm sorry for yelling.”

He shrugged. “Sorry about the alarms.” He drank the coffee and it was disgusting and his brow pinched. “I don't get why it's so hard. I mean, I got up for school every day last year. Was hardly ever late.”

She smiled wryly at him over the top of her mug. “Housekeeper, Johnny. First thing Darlene would do in the morning is go turn all your lights on, then she'd circle back half an hour later to knock on your door.”

“Oh.” And here he'd thought he just used to have a better clock, one with just the right alarm sound. He'd stood in the aisle at the store for like thirty minutes the day before, reading the boxes and trying to figure out which one was right.

“So,” she said briskly, folding up the paper and setting it down on the table, “why the early work-out? Are you so busy you can't fit it into your schedule later?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

“Well, try to fit cleaning the fridge in there somewhere, hm? There's a drawer full of slimy vegetables that need to be thrown.”

His shoulder slump. “I was supposed to – cook. With those.”

“Is that what they were for,” she wondered. “And since when do you cook?”

“Daniel said he'd show me how.”

Her eyebrows go up. “Daniel cooks? What a catch that boy is.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah, I think so.” His eyes land on

the paper and narrow. “Were you looking at property listings?”

“Don't panic,” she said, waving a hand. “Regardless of how the divorce ends, we'll probably be moving. I'm just – getting the lay of the land. Thank god you've graduated, though. Factoring in school districts in the search is such a pain.”

Johnny nodded automatically, not really understanding what she meant. He stared at the paper and drank some more coffee and it was still disgusting.

“You wouldn't, like. Move to Fresno, would you?” he asked suddenly.

Laura squinted at him.

After a moment, he shifted on his chair and muttered, “Please don't move to Fresno."

Johnny vs Close Call

Johnny pulled the Avanti up on the street just in front of the shop, and Daniel and Jessica looked down at him from the top step. Daniel immediately lit up with a smile, and Johnny looked away with a faint smirk before cutting the engine and hopping out.

“Andrews,” he said, taking all the steps in one leap and arriving at their side. He tucked his hands in pockets to avoid touching Daniel in greeting.

Jessica hugged the pot she was holding to her chest. “Lawrence,” she greeted, chin going up.

“Oh, so you two've already met,” said Daniel brightly. “That's great. Look at us, a little – flock of jocks.” Johnny scuffed the ground with his shoe and very deliberately said nothing. Daniel blinked. “Wait, *when* did—”

Johnny's eyes went a little wide in panic, because if Daniel found out he was guarding the shop across the street every evening, he'd either get annoyed about Johnny's protection or he'd get weirded out, or he'd get annoyed that Johnny wasn't spending the evening a little closer, and none of these options were great to get into, especially not with the chick standing right there.

“Oh, he just showed me some karate moves,” she said, meanwhile, and then she threw a punch just as Johnny was trying to think about how he'd argue that stake-outs *weren't* the same thing as fighting, so there was no reason Daniel should get mad.

He wasn't looking at her, and so he took the fist direct to the eye.

“Ow!” He stumbled back and nearly tumbled down the steps. He cupped his eye and looked around at her wildly. “What the hell?”

“Oh my god, I'm so sorry,” she said, eyes wide. She glanced at her own hand. “I thought you'd block it?”

Daniel made a caught noise that sounded suspiciously close to a laugh and stepped close to Johnny. He reached easily to pry his hand from the eye and turned Johnny's face this-way-and-that for examination; he didn't seem to be aware at all that this was a weird thing to do in front of Jessica. Johnny bit his tongue and submitted to the scrutiny,

because making a big deal of it was probably worse.

His face felt hot. And he'd made such a cool entrance, too.

“Hey, that was pretty good,” said Daniel, glancing back at Jessica warmly. “Look at you, you're a natural – you wanna maybe train some time? I've tried to get Johnny to do kata, but lately he's not been too interested—”

“I like kata,” he muttered, abruptly aware that Daniel's sensei has appeared in the doorway of the shop.

“Daniel-san,” said Mr. Miyagi, jerking his head back. “Trees need root pruning.”

“Yeah, I'll be right in,” said Daniel. “Oh, hey, Mr. Miyagi, did you see the pot Jessica made? It's got the little sketch of the bonsai on the front – here, Jessica, show him. Isn't that great?”

Johnny subtly stepped back from his hands. Daniel was so bad at this.

Johnny vs He's Not Invited

“So,” said Johnny, swinging into the shop after Daniel. He dodged a flatbed cart of soil and stepped over a coiled hose, and followed him back outside through the rear door, down the ramp to where a line of bare-rooted trees and Mr. Miyagi were waiting.

Johnny glanced at the man, who looked at him for a long moment before silently passing a pair of pruners to Daniel.

“Uh, so what about lunch?” asked Johnny.

Daniel grimaced and ducked his head, turning a tree carefully to peer at its root ball. “Can't do lunch. I'm – working out.”

“Working out,” he repeated, skeptical.

Daniel's eyes flicked up and narrowed. “*Yes*.” He straightened. “Hey, Johnny, I can work out too, you know. I work out all the time – tell him, Mr. Miyagi. Tell him about all the painting and sanding and waxing I do.”

That's not working out, Johnny would've said if they were alone. *Those are chores.* He'd heard all of this before, of course, and he was never fully convinced it wasn't all an elaborate con. A loving con, sure – like how his mom used to try to sneak carrot into cakes when she still used to bake when he was little – but still a con.

“Daniel-san very helpful young man,” said Mr. Miyagi, as if to prove Johnny's private point. Johnny raised an eyebrow at Daniel, who made a rude noise and looked between them.

“Oh, *thanks*. Okay, never mind him, he's – look, it's a lot of hard work, is what I'm saying, and that's not all of it – we go hiking as well,” he added virtuously.

“Cool, more walking,” said Johnny, unimpressed, “like that Andrews chick does.”

Daniel blinked and said, “Actually, that's who I'm working out with. Me and Jessica, we're going – running. At lunch.”

Johnny paused. “Oh, well, if it's running – I could go running. At lunch.”

“No,” said Daniel instantly.

Johnny narrowed his eyes. “No?”

“No, I don't think she'd like that – she's kind of shy. Physical activity is such an important part of a healthy lifestyle, I wouldn't want to discourage her by us getting all competitive.”

“Are we talking about the same girl?” he wondered. “The one who just punched me in the eye?”

“How about dinner instead?” continues Daniel, blithe.

And whatever, fine. Johnny didn't need to be part of their little running club. He'd probably get bored, anyway, having to pace himself so they didn't fall too far behind.

He shrugged. “Okay, fine.”

“Okay?” Daniel watched him walk over to collapse down on an overturned pail next to the building ramp. “So – what are you doing now?”

“Just taking a break,” said Johnny. “I got up at like, six.”

Daniel scoffed. “I don't believe you.”

Johnny shrugged again. He put his head back against the building and closed his eyes, just for a moment.

“Daniel-san?” said Mr. Miyagi.

“Mm,” said Daniel.

There was a long pause. A very long pause.

“Mind angle on those pruners,” said Mr. Miyagi at last, tone not quite a sigh.

Johnny vs A Stiffness in the Joints

“Hey, you gonna sleep all day?” said Daniel, and Johnny opened his eyes.

The other boy stood over his sprawled legs, looking down at him with a slightly quizzical smile. When Johnny blinked at him, he reached up and pushed his hair back from his forehead.

Johnny looked quickly past him, but Mr. Miyagi was no longer outside. He shuffled his head against the building and smiled and took hold of his hips to reel him in; Daniel came along easily.

“Time is it?” he mumbled, pressing his face into Daniel's stomach. His ass was a little numb from sitting on the pail, and his back felt stiff. Still, he didn't much want to move from this position, maybe never again.

“I don't know. You were asleep for like, twenty minutes maybe?”

“That's nothing.”

Daniel's stomach twitched in a slight laugh. “Yeah, you could do so much better.” And Johnny didn't know what he was saying, but it didn't matter because his hands were curling around the back of his neck, fingers slipping into his hair.

He dragged his forehead around a little, nuzzling. Daniel's hands firmed and flipped around, his thumbs hitting the underside of Johnny's jaw and pressing to tip his head up; Johnny came along easily.

Daniel's eyes were dark and hooded as he leaned down. Johnny accepted his kiss with relief. It hadn't even been a full day since the last time they kissed, but lately it was hard to be around Daniel and not be allowed to touch him. It felt wrong, and this felt right: like a joint cracking back into correct alignment.

Around them the breeze blew through the weeds of the empty lot behind the shop. In the distance, a train pulled its long siren.

“Daniel-san.”

Johnny could feel it: the moment Daniel stopped breathing. The fingers holding his face went hard and then slack and finally trembled,

all in quick succession, and then Daniel was stepping back and looking over to his sensei.

Johnny wasn't as brave as him. Johnny didn't look.

“Order just come in,” said Mr. Miyagi, and if his voice was unreadable on an average day, it was a complete black box just then. “Need help unpacking.”

“Okay,” said Daniel, and his voice wasn't unreadable at all, not even a little bit. Johnny wanted to grab his hand, but that was kind of the problem here in the first place, so he didn't move.

“I'll be right in,” he added, and Mr. Miyagi must turn back inside, because a second later Daniel's entire body loosens and sways like he's just taken a punch.

Johnny looks up at him. “Uh. I should – *should* I—?”

“Yeah,” said Daniel.

He searched his face. “You sure? I can—”

But Daniel's shoulders twitched and he stepped back again, out of arm's reach. He shook himself out and blinked rapidly, and his face fell into calm, determined lines. “No, it's fine.”

“Daniel.”

“It's going to be fine,” he said, with emphasis. He summoned a smile and met Johnny's wretched eyes, and the smile grew but only because he was forcing it. He so rarely wanted Johnny's support or comfort, and every time Johnny was reminded of this, he marveled he was ever able to forget.

Still, he tried.

“It will be fine,” he agreed, finally standing because he was sick of having to look up. He dusted off the seat of his jeans and rotated the stiffness out of his shoulders. He looked over to the open door of the building and then back at the other boy. “Remember, you just have to get him to understand – I'm your lady.”

For a moment, Daniel's smile was surprised into becoming briefly real again.

Daniel vs His Word

He walked with Johnny to the sidewalk around the front, and somewhere in the back of his mind he thought of it sort of like a relay, like he was handing Johnny off to the Avanti for care and comfort. This was one of the strange little delusions that came over a guy when he was in love, apparently. Imagine sharing custody with a car. He hoped they could make things work, he was pretty sure she could afford a better lawyer than him.

He'd be more amused about it if Johnny didn't look so worried, if he looked less grounded the moment he got behind the wheel. Daniel watched him look down at the dash and up again, and in the between space his shoulders actually relaxed a fraction. He studied the tawny line of his lowered eyelashes and thought: you really kill me sometimes.

“I'll see you tonight,” said Daniel, and for some reason he glanced automatically across the street to the pottery shop, but he didn't see Jessica or her boss in the window.

Sometimes he got the feeling like there were more eyes on the tree shop than there should be. Like someone was watching. It was probably just lingering vigilance from that Mike guy and his friends. And Daniel didn't want to become a paranoid person, so he deliberately looked away again.

“Yeah,” said Johnny, meanwhile. Frowning.

After he'd driven away, Daniel shook out his shoulders, turned around, and went inside the shop to where Mr. Miyagi was waiting.

Ever since he first got back to the valley from Parsippany, Mr. Miyagi has looked at him sometimes with a question in his eyes. Like he was waiting for Daniel to say something; Daniel always said *something.* But this whole time he hadn't said anything.

The question was no longer there when Mr. Miyagi looked up from the row of boxes inside the shop.

“Our first proper delivery to the shop,” said Daniel, walking forward. He flapped his arms. “Suddenly it's all feeling more real, huh. We got an address, we got,” and he grabbed the nearest box and turned it, showing off the mailing label, “an official business name and

everything. Would you look at that."

After a moment, Mr. Miyagi nodded neatly and turned back to the open box in front of him. Daniel lowered the box, his attempt at a smile fading.

"Look, about – about Johnny," he said, and Mr. Miyagi's hands paused over the folded-back sides of the box. He was listening, but Daniel's voice decided to stop there.

He wondered if he felt betrayed at all. He'd devoted himself to training Daniel last year, after all – teaching him how to defend himself against the very same guy he'd just walked in on him kissing. It was probably a bit of a shock.

It's just like you and Sato! he wanted to say, except of course in some of the very particular ways it was nothing like Mr. Miyagi and Sato, and the particulars of those particulars tended to be a sensitive topic for some people. A lot of people. Which was not to say he thought Mr. Miyagi was one of those people, they hadn't really ever broached the subject. He just figured he probably wasn't; he loved Daniel, after all, and if Daniel was one of those people now, that supposedly meant he always had been, at least a little. And he loved Daniel, which meant he already loved one of those people, and Mr. Miyagi was the kind of man who kept his word. This was all just a simple matter of logic or priorities, or something. Why was Daniel having a hard time believing his own bullshit for once.

"Postcard," said Mr. Miyagi, "said *don't know what Johnny looking for*."

"What? Oh," he said, remembering the unmailed postcard that had nevertheless found its way to Mr. Miyagi eventually. "Did it? I – I don't really remember what I wrote." He shuffled the box in his hands. "New Mexico feels like a really long time ago."

"Texas."

He shrugged and nodded. "Sure."

Mr. Miyagi sighed and looked at him for a long moment, and Daniel tried not to fidget. "Daniel-san is talking about boy a lot in postcard," he said eventually.

Daniel flushed. He wasn't sure if he was being accused of something, what Mr. Miyagi might mean by it. "Well, you know, you're trapped in a car with a guy for a thousand miles of desert, you run out of other

stuff to to write about." And then he realized he might sound like he was denying the thing with Johnny, so he added, "It – *this*, I mean. It started then. Back then, I mean. On the trip."

Mr. Miyagi nodded, eyebrows up a little, and Daniel narrowed his eyes, because he thought he knew that expression. That expression said Mr. Miyagi was being oh-so-very patient with Daniel, but he also very much wanted Daniel to *know* how patient he was being, so Daniel could stop forcing him to be so patient and get on with things.

"Look, a lot's changed from last year," he tried. "Johnny, he's," and he felt himself turning a little red again; he really hadn't expected it to be this strange to talk about him once Mr. Miyagi knew about the kissing thing. That could be really inconvenient, going forward. Talk about a vascular workout.

"Lawrence-san find what he looking for?" asked Mr. Miyagi.

"Yeah, I think so," said Daniel, who had no idea. "I mean, I think he still needs to find a job, technically. But yeah."

"Done fighting?"

Daniel went still; Mr. Miyagi noticed. They looked at each other.

"He's not going to fight anymore, he promised me," he said.

"And Daniel-san?" continued Mr. Miyagi, eyes intent.

"What? Who, me? C'mon, Mr. Miyagi, you know me, I'm a lover not a fighter," said Daniel, and then he winced and went red again.

Daniel vs Reassuring a Friend

It was a beautiful afternoon, even for a place that didn't have proper autumns. Daniel was hanging out in a park with a friend, getting a little light exercise in, and everything in his life felt like it was falling nicely into place.

He was halfway through his story about introducing Johnny to his mother when Terry sighed and said:

“Daniel, I think you need to start taking training for this tournament a little more seriously.”

Daniel's stomach dropped, and he straightened up in concern. “Oh, I'm sorry, Terry – I don't mean to waste your time, really, I just get a little distracted. But look, I really appreciate you taking the time out of your day to show me some pointers. Really. It's so great of you.”

Terry smiled. “I'm more than happy to – but that's not what I mean. These tournaments can be unpredictable, and they're never easy. You're the defending champion, but you should never get too complacent.”

“Of course,” said Daniel, nodding. It was a good point. “You're right, of course.”

He got back into ready stance and practiced a few more kicks. But before too long, the thought crept up, and he felt he had to say *something*. Just to put the older man's mind at ease. Mr. Miyagi was always so concerned about Daniel in a fight, and it didn't seem fair to lay that kind of burden on a brand new friend. Not when he was such a caring guy and all.

“Okay, it's only—”

He fell out of position again. Terry's shoulders slumped, his mitted hands dropping to his sides.

Daniel rushed to say, “It's only that none of,” and he almost said Cobra Kai, until he remembered at the last second that it would be sore reminder of Terry's poor dead friend, “none of the valley's top fighters from the past couple years are even going to be fighting next month? So the slate's looking pretty good.”

“But that boy you said had been giving you trouble – he looked like a tough fighter, didn't he?” asked Terry, patience quivering on an edge.

Daniel shrugged and nodded. “Yeah, sure. I mean, yes.” Probably, if Johnny hadn't hurt him too bad. “That's why I was so glad you when you offered to help, I know I need a little extra something on my side.”

He paused, chewing his lip. He thought about the way Mike had needed help limping out of the shop that night, and the terrible story Johnny had told him the other day on the road.

“You know,” he said, “Johnny was two-time All Valley Champ.”

Terry's eyebrows went up a little. “Really.”

“Yeah. And I beat him last year,” he added, modestly. “So I just don't want you to worry too much. I got this. Really.”

After a moment, Terry's wide mouth creased into a smile. He gestured with one of the hand mitts like he was pointing to Daniel. “You're confident, I like that. A certain amount of cockiness is good for a fighter – their opponent senses it, it can put them off-balance.”

Daniel spread his arms and grinned. “Sounds like I'm off to a great start, then.”

“A fighter's mind can be his own worst enemy,” said Terry, as if he hadn't spoken. “Don't forget that, Daniel.”

His grin faded and he nodded quickly. That sounded reasonable enough.

Terry gestured again, meaningfully, and Daniel resumed his fighting position. Terry's eyes scanned his body closely, likely looking for anything that needed correction.

When he said nothing, Daniel felt a little proud.

Daniel vs Training Plans

“I, I uh,” said Daniel, trying to speak as though he had a normal amount of lung capacity at his disposal, “So, I gotta get back.”

Terry paused in his mid-run stretching, looking surprised. He straightened out of the position, unfolding that long body to its full height. “Really? I thought you wanted to spend the afternoon training.”

Daniel flapped a hand. “Oh, well – I mean, I'd love to. This has been great. But yeah, there's a lot of work to do at the shop, and I don't want to let Mr. Miyagi down. Especially,” and he paused, glancing up at Terry and away. “Especially since – he sort of knows, now. About Johnny and me, I mean.”

Terry sounded nothing but concerned when he said, “Really? That's a big development, Daniel – are you okay? How did he react? If you need—”

“Oh, it's fine,” said Daniel hastily, waving his hands. He smiled around a deep gulp of air. “Really, it went – alright, I think. He mostly didn't seem to know what to say. Which I get. I mean, I didn't know how to say it, so.” He cleared his throat.

His breath was slowly coming back to him, and he felt comfortable enough to finally make eye contact without giving away the game and looking like he was completely out of shape. He didn't want the other man thinking he was a lost cause. In a fight, Daniel counted on a hefty dose of adrenaline and terror, but it was hard to explain that to someone training you without sounding a little bit like a weakling.

Terry watched him closely: a strange, almost melancholic look in his light eyes. “First your mom and now your sensei – those are the big ones, aren't they,” he said, unreadable.

“Yeah,” said Daniel, and it felt momentous to even think about it. The road ahead looked completely clear, except for this damn tournament.

“Not every family takes the news that their only son is queer so well,” Terry continued. He folded his arms across his chest and inclined his head gravely. “I hope you realize how lucky you are.”

Daniel thought about Johnny's stepdad. “Yeah, I know. Ma and Mr.

Miyagi – they're great people. The best. Some days I don't think I – I mean. I know I'm lucky."

They began to walk across the park grass to where the cars were parked.

"Have you thought any more about asking your sensei to train you for the tournament?" asked Terry.

Daniel laughed a little awkwardly. "Hey, man, one big secret at a time, y'know? Mr. Miyagi does a lot of breathing exercises, but I don't want to drive the man into a coma."

He felt Terry look down at him. Their elbows brushed, and Daniel almost startled; he took a subtle step to the side to widen the distance between them. He needed watch his step more closely.

"So he doesn't know you plan to fight."

He shrugged. "Like I said, there's a lot going on with the shop. And I've been pulled away enough as it is, with Johnny. I don't want to bother him about it."

"That makes sense. Very thoughtful, Daniel."

Daniel felt the back of his neck warm. "I mean, it's just. It's nothing."

They reached Terry's truck, and Daniel was getting a lot better at not thinking about how Johnny would react to it. The key was to ignore the truck.

Terry turned and leaned back against the passenger door, crossing his long legs. He was wearing running shorts, and they displayed the clean, strong cut of his thighs and calves. His leg hair was dark and curly, looked soft to the touch.

He wondered why he hadn't ever really noticed this kind of thing before he started dating Johnny; was he going to spend the rest of his life getting his head turned by every other person on the street? Talk about inconvenient. He cleared his throat.

"...not going to train you, then I really think you should consider coming to my dojo," Terry was saying.

Daniel blinked. "What? Oh – you have a dojo? Really?"

It was Terry's turn to shrug. "Technically, it's not mine. It was my

friend's." He waited a beat and, when Daniel didn't react, he added, a little impatiently, "John Kreese?"

"*Oh*," said Daniel. "That dojo."

Terry smiled a little. "You know it?"

"Yeah, yes. I – yes." Daniel glanced around the street, shifting back on his heels. He looked back at Terry. "Sorry, what? You want me to train there?"

"I want my friend to not get his ass kicked next month," said Terry.

Jeez, maybe he shouldn't have exercised with the guy. Daniel liked it a lot better when he was bowing to him and calling him the champion.

"So what do you think?" pressed Terry.

"I – don't know," said Daniel, feeling torn. He scratched the back of his head. "I appreciate the offer, really, but I'm super busy these days, with the shop, and, and *Johnny*—"

Earlier, when Terry was talking about his training in Korea, he'd mentioned things like knuckle pushups. Daniel didn't want to be doing knuckle pushups; it's not that he *couldn't*, physically, like probably, but he knew himself. The whole time he was huffing and puffing and sweating, he'd be thinking bitterly about how he could be getting kissed by Johnny someplace comfortable. Hell, if Mr. Miyagi was trying to train him the first time around this year instead of last, he wasn't sure it would be nearly as successful. You could do almost anything to high schoolers and they'll just take it; an adult has better things to do. Like kiss Johnny and sit in his lap.

Terry was staring at him blankly. His fingers were a little white at the tips, pressing against his own biceps. And Daniel was *so* ungrateful. Here this guy was trying so hard to help him, and what was he doing? Ogling his legs and obsessing over personal problems.

"Actually," said Daniel abruptly, "that sounds great, Terry. Are you still calling it Cobra Kai, or are you going with a less – y'know what, doesn't matter. You probably want to honor your friend. So: Cobra Kai. Great, that's great."

"You won't regret it," promised Terry, smiling tightly.

Johnny vs Short Term Plans

“Okay,” said Bobby, when they got back to the Avanti. “You can talk now.”

Johnny thumped his head back against the driver's seat and rolled it to give him a stony look. There was nothing to say that he hadn't already said in the hallway of the County building, namely: a lot of *jesus christ*s and *are you fucking kidding me*s, before he was ordered to shut up.

Bobby kept his expression patient, but it looked like it cost him. “Look, I never said this was going to be the end of it.”

“We've accomplished exactly nothing,” said Johnny flatly. He snatched the paper out of his hands and waved it. The dojo from Mike Barnes's tournament application belonged to a company with a nondescript name: T & J LLC. It was a new purchase. This was all they'd found out. “We have another name leading to another dead end.”

“No name is a dead end. You just need to stop expecting that you're going to get to walk through a door and punch this thing out. Look, I'll talk to my dad," he said, taking the paper back and smoothing it over his denim-clad knee, evening out the wrinkles from Johnny's frustrated grip.

“What's he going to do, talk to a judge? Sue the company to make them cough up some names?”

Bobby shook his head. “There are ways of finding out this kind of information. I don't know – paperwork filed with the state or something. Like I said, I have to talk to him.”

“Great,” said Johnny. He flexed his hands over the steering wheel. “At this rate, we'll be lucky to find Barnes before tournament day.”

“Maybe you should ask Daniel if he remembers that one guy's name. If we could find him, figure out what he knows about Cobra Kai....”

Johnny narrowed his eyes out the windshield. “I ask Daniel that, he'll want to know why I want to know.”

He couldn't even picture it. When would be an inconspicuous time to

ask? Is he supposed to stop kissing him into his mattress and go *oh, by the way*.

“Call it curiosity,” suggested Bobby. Johnny glanced at him. “Yeah, okay. You're not exactly the curious type. Fine.”

Johnny thumped his head back against the seat again. They were silent for a few minutes, until Bobby shifted around in the passenger seat, and Johnny tensed. There was something deliberate about that shifting. His instincts told him it was a signal, and maybe he should start the car and get them out of here before—

“So when are you going to bring Daniel over, anyway?” asked Bobby.

Johnny licked his bottom lip and stared ahead. “What?”

“Well,” he said, “unless you plan to just keep the two parts of your life forever separate, I was just wondering – *really*, Johnny?”

The Avanti's engine purred loud and smooth. She always had his back.

Until Bobby reached over and twisted the key forward, silencing her. Johnny glared at him, but Bobby only raised his eyebrows.

“Look,” said Bobby, “I'm not even suggesting you try to hang out with like, Dutch,” and here, Johnny very deliberately thought about nothing, lest the thought make its way to his face, “I'm just saying, bring him along next time you come to campus. What's the worst that can happen?”

It was the kind of question that revealed something of the gulf between them, a gulf he couldn't really put into words. The worst that could happen was Bobby or the others would see Johnny being – not weak, it wasn't weak. But it was something that could be read as weak, and that was almost worse, because being misunderstood was usually worse.

Actually, the worst that could happen was Daniel seeing Johnny with the guys, and maybe he'd suddenly realize he wasn't all that different from the guy who hurt him last year.

“Could be awkward,” said Johnny.

“Yeah, probably,” said Bobby. “I mean, I did fuck up his knee pretty bad.”

He looked at him in sharp surprise. “That's not – Bobby, man, that's not why I'm—”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, interrupting Johnny before he could fumble out an explanation. “I'm not bringing that up to – Johnny, you said it yourself last night. We're all Cobra Kai, we have to own that. And for me, that means I have to make amends.”

“This doesn't sound exactly like a *fun time*,” he muttered, knuckling at his eyes. He didn't want to think about this.

“Yeah, maybe. But it's a necessary step. I mean, if you think this thing is going to last longer than another month.”

Johnny said nothing; the last time he talked about the future with his friends, it kind of spectacularly blew up in his face.

Bobby shoved lightly at his shoulder. “Johnny?”

“Yeah,” he said, hand going back to the key. “Okay, yeah. I'll think about it.”

Johnny vs The Shotgun Speech

Daniel's sensei was still at the shop when Johnny returned that evening. Johnny took thirty seconds at the door to psych himself up and get a grip on his breathing, and then he went inside.

It felt different. There was no reason it should, but it did. Maybe it was how Daniel didn't light up unthinkingly the moment he looked over and saw Johnny just inside the doorway. The smile still came, of course, but in between was a quick glance to Mr. Miyagi, who was blinking over his shoulder at him.

Well, he hadn't kicked Daniel out, so that was something. Johnny knew the man seemed to like the chores thing, but he figured the skin crawling discomfort some people felt about guys like them beat cheap labor. So that was something.

“Hey Johnny,” said Daniel, in a fair approximation of his normal ease. “So, contain your shock, but – he knows.”

Johnny didn't know what to say to that, so he just nodded and tried to stretch his mouth into something resembling a smile as Mr. Miyagi surveyed him.

He wondered if this was the moment he got the shotgun speech. Would a karate sensei give a shotgun speech? It was kind of pointless at this stage; after all, Johnny had already hurt Daniel, and Mr. Miyagi had definitely responded swiftly and without much mercy. He sort of got the message last year. And the man hadn't even needed a shotgun.

He should say something, he thinks.

“We're, uh, we usually don't,” make out at the shop, he was absolutely not going to say to this man. Aside from the mortification, it wasn't even true. “Thanks for being cool about it,” he said instead, awkwardly.

Daniel gave him a very sarcastic two thumbs up, a gesture he hastily dropped when Mr. Miyagi glanced between them.

“Boys have hard heads, hot tempers,” said Mr. Miyagi, and it seemed he was actually talking to both of them. “Must be careful.”

Johnny had always thought of himself as a pretty calm and laid-back

guy, actually. But he didn't want to refute the man. Seemed rude.

“My temper's not that bad,” said Daniel. “I mean, sure, I got a short fuse but there's not a whole lot of ammunition packed away in there, y'know?”

Johnny didn't roll his eyes, but it was a near thing. Instead, he said, “I'll look after him, sir.”

Which got him two sets of raised eyebrows.

“No sir,” said Mr. Miyagi.

He hesitated, confused. “No?”

“He means, don't call him sir,” said Daniel, a little terse. “And I don't need anybody *looking after me*. Jesus.”

Johnny glanced quickly at Mr. Miyagi, who watched them both. He smiled tightly. “It's just a phrase, you don't have to get offended.”

Daniel nodded a few times. “Sure, a phrase, just a phrase. Which means there's plenty of other ones you could've used.”

Christ.

“Is it really that bad, the idea of me looking after you?” demanded Johnny, bracing his hands on his hips.

He'd been wrong before, this wasn't like a shotgun speech moment. It was something much, much more confusing. Like if the daughter had grabbed the shotgun from the dad and pointed it at Johnny herself. Except instead of demanding he look after her, she was saying *don't you dare.* It's like Daniel wanted his sensei to think Johnny was a shitty boyfriend.

“Of course not,” said Daniel, flushed and beginning to sound kind of pissed. “It's real nice, Johnny. I look after you, you look after me. Everybody should always look after everybody, isn't that in the social contract? What kind of sociopath would I be if I didn't like that? I mean, I believe in world peace. Yeah. Great stuff!”

Johnny decided to ignore – all that.

“Then what's the problem?” he asked through his teeth.

“I just don't know why you have to go trotting that line out, like

you're facing down some kind of shovel speech. I mean, there's other things to say, man.” Daniel spread his arms. “You could say a bunch of other stuff, normal stuff. Why can't you say normal stuff?”

"What are you even talking about right now?” he said, frustrated.

“Hard heads,” said Mr. Miyagi again, moving past them towards the door.

Johnny vs What Can He Do

“What are you doing?” said Daniel, when Johnny reached for a basket. “What, are we planning on having a picnic in the freezer aisle? Did people on the Oregon Trail try to haul all their belongings behind them on a kid's little red wagon? Put that down, man. Proper shopping requires real towing capacity.”

Johnny widened his eyes at him and let the handles of the basket drop. He shoved his hands in his pockets and watched as Daniel dragged a shopping cart out from the long line by the door. The rattle of the wires and wheels sounded too loud to his ears: obvious.

They turned towards the produce section.

“So,” said Daniel brightly after his sensei had left, and by the sound of his voice, it was like the previous five minutes hadn't even happened, “what's the plan for dinner?”

Johnny shifted his jaw and said, “Why don't you tell me, since you're so concerned about being the boss or whatever.”

And then he turned to head back outside. He wasn't going to like, *leave*. He just wanted to be out of the shop, out of Daniel's space. Figured maybe he'd feel less useless then.

He made it three paces before Daniel collided with his back, his arms snaking through the gap between his elbow and waist and locking down. Johnny stumbled half a step forward before he stopped their momentum, and then he stood still and took it.

He sighed.

In the store, Daniel hefted an onion in consideration and said, “Okay, what do you and your mom like to eat?”

“I don't know,” said Johnny, looking around at piles of vegetables. None of it looked very good. “Pizza? Burgers? Sweet and sour chicken?” He thought about it. “She orders salad sometimes.”

“Happy for her arteries,” said Daniel faintly, doing a pretty shit job of hiding what he thought of everything he'd just heard.

Johnny frowned and lightly kicked the shopping cart forward, so it would knock Daniel's ankles; the other boy jumped and made a face at him.

“If you're going to be like this the whole time, we can just skip it,” said Johnny.

Daniel put his hands up. “Okay, okay. Look – how about a casserole or something? Something simple.”

“Fine.”

Daniel shook the onion in his face like a maraca and carefully placed it into the empty cart, where it immediately rolled to the back.

Johnny thought about shoving the cart again. He resisted.

“Hey, c'mon,” said Daniel against his back.

“What.”

“Jeez, Johnny, don't be mad – Mr. Miyagi didn't care, shouldn't this be a reason to celebrate? What are we doing for dinner. I'm starving.”

The worst part was, he couldn't tell if Daniel genuinely didn't see the problem. During the few days he'd hung around Parsippany before leaving, Johnny had seen him get into loud talking matches with his uncle, his uncle's neighbors, and one morning even the mailman, and the other boy always flipped back to calm seconds after the argument was over, like it was as simple as that, as breathing.

He hesitated another couple seconds, and Daniel's hands crept down to tuck into the front pockets of Johnny's jeans.

“My mom's out having dinner with some friends,” he said at last, a little defeated. “Thought maybe – maybe you could show me how to cook something.”

It had sounded more fun before. Now it was just a reminder that Johnny didn't know how to do anything, offer anything.

Meanwhile, Daniel pressed another kiss to his spine. “Sounds like a plan.”

Johnny vs Alliums

If he thought the garlic was bad, it was nothing to chopping the onion. He hadn't even pierced the outer skin before Daniel was going *whoa, whoa, whoa—*

Johnny sighed and put the knife down again. “What.”

“Well – you're doing it wrong.”

This had been a mistake, clearly. What had he been thinking, asking this ego maniac control freak to teach him anything. The whole thing had been doomed from the start; the moment Daniel took a look at the pool house's kitchen supplies, he'd started shaking his head. Apparently being poor didn't stop some people from being weird snobs.

“What do you mean, I'm doing it wrong, I haven't even started yet.” Johnny twisted to look at him. “And how can one *do it* wrong? If it's gets chopped, then how can it be wrong?”

Daniel put his hands up, like that had a chance of convincing Johnny he meant well. “There's a right way and wrong way to do it, okay. Your way, you're making it harder for yourself.”

“Seems to me like you're the one making it harder.”

“Look, just – here,” and here it was, the inevitable Daniel LaRusso move; the other boy stepped up close behind him and took hold of both his hands like he was moving in on some girl at the Golf N' Stuff. Johnny gritted his teeth as he guided him with the knife and onion. “See, if you bisect the root first, the onion will maintain its structural integrity as you do the rest of the slicing. See, Johnny? See?”

“Yeah, I see.”

Daniel patted his stomach and stepped back. “I'm going to brown the ground beef.”

Johnny frowned and picked at the papery skin on his half-onion. “You do that.”

“You know,” said Daniel from his perch on the edge of the kitchen counter, “it occurs to me that we could be taking more advantage of this here empty house.”

Johnny shoved the sizzling onions and garlic around the pan some more. “Thought you said you were hungry.”

“Well – yeah—”

“*I*'m hungry. I've been up since like, five-thirty.”

“Yeah, you've only mentioned it five times today. What d'you want, a medal?” Daniel stopped kicking his legs and narrowed his eyes. “You're not going to be too tired, are you.”

Johnny looked at him.

Daniel waved an arm in the direction of the dark living. “I'm just saying – empty house! Don't ruin this for us.”

Daniel dug his chin into Johnny's shoulder muscle and tightened his arms around his waist, and it was like trying to cook with a koala on his back or something.

“See, casseroles are great, because you can basically just throw anything together and bake it, and it'll be good. I mean, there are certain rules you have to follow – like, your rookie mistake with the penne earlier,” *it just didn't seem cooked enough*, Johnny muttered beneath the babble, “but overall it's pretty forgiving, and there's usually leftovers, so it's a great thing to start with. It's pretty cool that you want to try cooking for your mom – did I mention that?” And here, Daniel stepped back just far enough to let Johnny bend to put the dish in the preheated oven, though his hands didn't lose connection for a second. “Sometimes I worry I don't give you enough compliments about things outside of the bedroom, but y'know, I think you're a very uh, well-rounded individual—”

Johnny shut the oven with a little too much force and turned around. In the next moment he had Daniel on his back on the kitchen table, a hand over his mouth.

Daniel's eyes went a little wide.

Johnny shut his eyes and dropped his head to his chest. He was actually pretty tired. And hungry. And, despite Daniel's presence, for some reason in kind of a shitty mood; it felt weird to feel like this, to discover the other boy wasn't a magical bulletproof vest against every bad feeling in the world. So now he felt weirdly guilty on top of everything else.

After a few seconds, he registered something warm and wet tickling his palm – and, and what was Daniel, a fucking child? Johnny raised his head to say this, but then Daniel was preempting the question by taking two of his fingers into his mouth and sucking.

“Jesus christ,” said Johnny, staring.

“What?” said Daniel, grinning a little sheepishly. His face was red. "Your hand smelled good."

Oh fuck yes, he said, as Johnny hauled him up again and turned towards his bedroom.

Johnny vs Foreplay

“Was beginning to think you were gonna stay mad all night,” said Daniel, as Johnny dumped him on the bed. He leaned back on his elbows and watched as Johnny stripped off his shirt, unbuttoned his jeans. They hadn't bothered with the lights, so he couldn't read the look in his eyes. But he could guess.

He shoved his jeans down, kicked them off. Daniel sat up and reached for him, and Johnny let himself be drawn in.

Daniel bypassed his hardening dick and pressed his mouth to his stomach, along the thin line of hair there. He rolled his eyes up to look at Johnny, who said belatedly:

“Wasn't mad,” because it was true. That wasn't it, exactly.

“Sometimes,” said Daniel, ruminative as he dragged his hand down the back of Johnny's bare thigh, “sometimes I can tell someone's getting annoyed? Like, it's too much, I am. I can hear it in their voice, I can see it. But I can't seem to make myself stop. I don't know why – it's like I'm a, a train on a set of tracks, and there's only one way to go, so I *go*. I just keep going.” He looked down, and his hand tapped Johnny's leg, restless. “And I have to hope once I'm through, the other person'll still be there.”

Daniel was trying to explain, he realized. Or apologize, or something.

Johnny nudged him backwards, and Daniel let himself be pushed. He shuffled back on the bed, and watched unblinking as Johnny followed on his hands and knees, crowding him, covering him.

Sometimes I can tell I'm not enough, he wanted to say. He stared into Daniel's eyes and thought: if he's a train, then Johnny's just some guy running along the tracks trying to catch him. And maybe there's a tunnel coming up, maybe he's running out of chances.

“I'm still here,” he said.

Johnny vs Telling How It's Gonna Be

He fit so perfectly in Johnny's lap, said Johnny fit perfectly inside him. And Johnny wanted to believe.

He tried sitting up, once, wanting to run his hand up the smooth liquid length of the other boy's back, and Daniel's hands went to his shoulders – caressed them briefly before shoving them back down against the bed.

“Said you were tired, didn't you? Lay back, man. I got this.” And he sure did.

Daniel breathed deep and rolled his head back along his neck as he rocked down, taking all of Johnny there was to take. He went slow but it was anything but languid, all of his usual frenetic energy compressed down, coiled like a spring he was refusing to let go. Johnny could feel his legs trembling where he held them tight against his torso; he ran his hands up his thighs in automatic comfort.

Johnny flexed up, and Daniel faltered briefly out of his carefully measured rhythm.

“What – stop that,” said Daniel on a gasp, when Johnny did it again.

“You're such a control freak,” he said, and he did not stop, because this was the one area of their life where he knew he could do something for him, and Daniel was going to let Johnny, he was going to be relieved about it.

“But you said you – you,” and this time Daniel didn't fight it when Johnny sat up, he just flattened his hand against Johnny's hard abdomen and sort of sighed. Like he was relieved.

Johnny reached down and rubbed the hot, slippery stretch of skin spread around his hard dick. He studied Daniel's face, the flicker of his gulping throat, the flutter of his eyelids. He took hold of his hips and pulled him down hard, and Daniel's chin bounced up, his mouth fell open.

Johnny leaned in and folded that plush lip between his teeth.

“Let go,” he said into his mouth, like he was trying to speak the command right to the center of him. He lifted Daniel, who gave up

entirely on trying to maintain his motion and who now turned easy and compliant between Johnny's hands, melting into him like he'd forgot where the borders were.

Johnny dragged him back down, gorgeous welcoming heat engulfing him, and it was all Daniel.

"*Johnny—*"

"Let go," he said again, and: "I got you, c'mon. Do you feel that?"

And it was better in a bed, it was better in his bed, a space that could belong to them. Every ruck of the sheets and that second pillow Johnny didn't use anymore because he thought of it as Daniel's, the glimpses he got of their clothes intermingled on the floor. It was all a part of it, a scattering of clues all adding up to the sum of them, together.

"You should stay the night," he said, twisting his hips to get some elevation; he needed to roll them soon, set a new pace.

Daniel shook his head a little, dazed and panting. "What?"

"Stay here," said Johnny, "and we can do this all night."

"So much for being tired," said Daniel, head falling back again. "You're incredible."

Johnny thrust up into him one more time and then held him tight to his chest as he turned and laid him down on the mattress. Daniel made a sharp noise and thrashed around until he was face down, moaning into the sheets, and they haven't done this position before, but Johnny understood why people did it as soon as Daniel shakily pushed up onto his knees, and the angle was somehow completely different, and they both groaned.

"I could fall asleep kissing you," said Johnny, and the sex was his only excuse for letting it out. He heard Daniel's breathless *oh, god, you sap*, and dragged his forehead across his sweat-slick back. He sucked in a lungful of air, like a swimmer about to dive deep.

And then he straightened up and set about trying to bring them both home.

Johnny vs Main Course

The casserole was only a little burnt.

“Sure you don't want to feed it to me?” asked Daniel, the little prick. He was sprawled on his front, still naked, and hadn't so much as twitched a muscle since Johnny had remembered dinner and bolted from the room.

Johnny ignored him and handed over the plate and fork. He slumped down on the floor, back against the bed. For his own part, he'd put his boxers back on. There was something kind of scandalous about eating completely naked, he thought as he glanced over his shoulder at Daniel.

Johnny sawed off piece of the casserole and thought, okay, maybe more than a little burnt. He was pretty sure a casserole wasn't supposed to require a knife.

“Still tastes good,” said Daniel.

Johnny looked down at his plate, at the stiff-edged block of food. “You think my mom will like it?”

“She'll like that you made it.”

Which wasn't a very satisfying answer. Johnny shook his head and chewed for a while longer, not saying anything.

A few minutes later, Daniel's long brown arm reached past him to drop the empty plate onto the floor. A rustling sound came behind him on the bed, and then, inevitably, Daniel's head thumped down on the edge of mattress beside Johnny's shoulder. He sighed gustily, but it was a lazy sigh, not an unhappy one, so Johnny kept eating.

“Think I need a shower,” said Daniel after a moment.

Johnny snorted and shook his head over his final bites of casserole. “Just can't get enough, huh.”

Daniel flicked the side of his head. “I actually mean a shower, jackass. I worked out over lunch, remember? It's been an active day for me. I know my manly musk really gets you going,” *ugh*, said Johnny, “but yeah, a shower. Now. Or really, ten minutes ago would've been better.”

Ten minutes ago, Daniel had been fucking himself back on Johnny's dick, but if he wasn't going to mention it, neither was Johnny.

He dumped his plate on top of Daniel's on the carpet and twisted to give him a look. “You saying no more sex?”

“...Thought you said you were like, *so tired*,” he said, protesting. He didn't seem to be aware that he was inching forward on the bed, was actually in danger of tipping off the edge into Johnny's lap. His eyes had drifted down, and he was absently gazing at Johnny's chest; he bit his lower lip.

Johnny said, “This place has a tub, you know.”

Daniel opened his mouth to say – something, but then the words sank in, and he paused, lips pursed and already lost to the thought.

Johnny shrugged easily and turned back around, shuffling down like he was getting comfortable on the floor: no desire to move any time soon, nope. He was so tired, after all. “I mean, just in case you wanted a bath or some—”

Daniel lunged down from the bed and tackled him sideways, and Johnny choked on a laugh.

Johnny vs Not The Club Dinner

Johnny stumbled out of the bedroom the next morning, vaguely put off by the emptiness of his bed, and then deeply alarmed by the sounds from the other room. He only remembered to pull on his boxers at the last second.

In the kitchen, his mom sat at the table looking kind of hungover, with her hair piled in a damp towel on top of her head, a peaky bleak look in her eyes. Daniel was washing the dinner dishes from the night before (shit, Johnny forgot about those), and talking.

“And the best part of owning your own business,” said Daniel over his shoulder, “you get to decide your own hours and vacation days. Me and Mr. Miyagi haven't really talked about it yet, but I'm sure he won't want to work during any holiday – I mean, who's gonna be out shopping for bonsai trees on Thanksgiving anyway? Thanksgiving is for turkey, and watching the Jets get their butts kicked – excuse my language.”

“It's okay,” said Laura, and she raised her eyes to Johnny, looking hunted.

“Daniel's here,” he told her.

“Oh, you're awake,” said Daniel, glancing over with a bright smile. He didn't seem to understand even his smiles were too loud for the morning. “I was just finishing up in here. I was going to let you sleep some more.”

“Sleep is so important,” mused Laura. She startled slightly as Daniel spun around the next moment: coffee pot in hand, dark liquid swishing wildly inside.

“Smells good and ready,” he announced, and he poured her a cup.

She stared down at it and then up again at Johnny, who slumped down in the chair opposite. She drank. He yawned.

“What were we talking about,” said Daniel, but not like it was a question. He flipped a dish towel over his shoulder and went to lean against the small counter next to the sink; he hitched forward after barely making contact, and over by the table, Johnny's face went hot. He rolled his shoulders and squinted off to the side, like he was

thinking really hard about something.

“Oh, right – Thanksgiving. What do you guys usually do for Thanksgiving?”

“Shit,” said Johnny, and after a second he realized it had sounded weird because his mom said it at the same time.

He looked at her desperately. “We're not doing the club dinner this year, right?”

Laura clutched her coffee mug. “I can't think about this right now.”

“Sorry,” said Daniel, chagrined. “I didn't realize it was touchy subject. It's only – it is next week.”

“Mom, please, not the club dinner,” said Johnny, picturing the scratchy collar and dull music and what if Sid has told people about the reason for the divorce? The man hated feeling like he was beaten, would do or say anything to make it clear he hadn't lost Laura but dumped them both. Johnny pictured a whole night of feeling people's gazes on his back, and he went cold.

Laura shut her eyes and drank her coffee like it required all of her attention and focus. Johnny looked at Daniel, who mouthed a frantic *sorry, I'm sorry*, because the moron didn't understand their reactions had nothing to do with him.

“Hey, you could always have dinner with us,” said Daniel. “I mean, like I said, I haven't actually talked to my partner about it, but he loves to cook, I mean we both do, and the more the merrier, probably. And my mom's coming down for it, so it could be like a whole party, it could be fun.”

“Daniel, could you please give me some more coffee,” asked Laura.

John vs Reading Between the Lines

He watched Terry hang up the phone; watched as he rubbed his mouth over the glittering line of his rings, the way his wide lips pulled up in a barely-there snarl of frustration. His lashes fell as he thought about whatever he'd just heard.

“Is something wrong?” he asked casually, placing his cigar down on the ashtray that sat on the small table between their chairs. They were in Terry's library, where he always liked to smoke because he enjoyed the decadence of slowly destroying hundreds of priceless rare books.

Terry glanced up, wariness melting into reassurance. “Nothing I can't fix. The boy isn't coming to the dojo tonight after all – says he's feeling *under the weather*.” They trade a look about that, but John could tell his friend was actually angry; he went very still when he was angry.

John stood and went around the back of the sumptuous leather armchair. He dropped his hands to Terry's shoulders and squeezed the muscle there, once, twice. Terry's head dropped forward, but not like he was relaxing.

He hadn't meant to put all this on his shoulders. But Terry had lit up with the idea of it, had smiled at him like John was granting *him* a favor, like it meant something when John agreed to let him try. It was that last part that made him uneasy. Terry got his hopes up too quickly, with John. He always started making all sorts of plans.

“He responds to pain and fear,” said John. “Kid was shaking like a newborn deer at the tournament last year.”

It made him angry just to think about it. An outsider coming into his space. Obviously unfit. An embarrassment to the discipline. Daniel LaRusso's fear felt dangerous, his softness – infectious. He had to look no further than his own student to know he'd been right.

“I've already hurt him,” said Terry, and his shoulders were still tight beneath John's grip. He never wanted to relax unless it was on his own terms. He didn't trust John enough.

“So hurt him again,” he said softly. “Remind him how weak and helpless he really is.”

Terry shook his head. “He knows he's weak, he's just fooled himself

into thinking it doesn't matter." He paused; John felt it and stopped the massage. When Terry twisted around to look at him, he met his eyes.

"Do I have your permission to do whatever I think needs to be done?"

"I know better than to say yes to something so vague," said John, because in the past Terry has thought many things needed to be done, and there were a few times John disagreed; mainly when it involved torture or kissing.

"Can I hurt John Lawrence?" asked Terry, and he held very still as he waited for a response.

John stared down into his clear, pale eyes, and he thought about nothing because nothing was what he thought about when he thought about his students. How many times did he have to learn the lesson: love was weakness. Which made its object your enemy.

John loved his students. He loved Johnny Lawrence, who he'd built with such care and focus: his masterpiece. Johnny could take out another fighter in as few as two moves, and he always looked at John and smiled afterwards, because John had given him a life where he never had to feel pain or confusion.

"It'll be good for him, won't it, in the long run," he said.

Terry immediately smiled up at him like this meant something special. Terry knew love was weakness. He didn't care. He knew better than to ever say anything, but John could still see the terrible truth in his eyes. *Let me be weak to you, and you be weak to me. Any moment one of us could deliver the killing blow, but we don't ever do it. Could any of your women give you that?*

John calmly lifted his hands away from Terry's shoulders and went back to his own chair. He picked up the cigar again and aimed his next puff of smoke at the shelf containing the first edition William Blakes. His ears were ringing faintly, like some C4 had detonated nearby.

"And it's too perfect," Terry was saying; he talked so much sometimes, it was hard to keep up so John often didn't bother. "Daniel LaRusso will see he's useless to protect his little boyfriend, and John Lawrence will get what's been coming to him since he decided he could walk away from you."

Any moment, the killing blow.

Johnny vs The DMZ

“Man, this is the life,” said Daniel, reclining back on the raft with his hands behind his head. He nudged his sunglasses more firmly into place. “When I get the money, I'm totally buying a place with a pool – and I'll be out there all the time, every day of every year. I mean, swimming in November, how great is this?”

“You're not swimming,” said Johnny, pausing between laps. Daniel's borrowed swim shorts weren't even wet, that's how much he wasn't swimming.

Daniel ignored him and continued happily regaling the sky: “This is the *life*. If this was Newark, I'd have to go down to the Y or something, breathe in the chlorine fumes alongside splashing classes of pollywogs. Never again. You know, when I have my own pool, I'm going to have a different pair of swim trunks for every day of the week.”

“Seems excessive,” said Johnny. He hauled himself through the heavy water until he was standing next to the raft, and looked down at him.

The borrowed trunks were too big, the waistband loose on Daniel's narrow hips. If he tried swimming, there was a good chance he'd make the transition to skinny-dipping inside two minutes.

Johnny realized he was gazing at the line of paler skin on the soft underside of Daniel's stomach, and quickly looked up and around. He never actually used the pool any more – this was the first time since August, maybe. It felt like No Man's Land, and he couldn't shake the suspicion they were being surveilled out here. Sid or one of the help watching, waiting for him to be gay out in the open.

“It's a pool, Johnny,” said Daniel. “What is the point of even having one if you're not going to be a little excessive? You gotta learn to enjoy life a little more, man.”

“I enjoy life fine,” he replied, with a meaningful tone and even more meaningful look. Daniel grinned at him.

“You do, huh,” he said and he sighed and stretched, and if his stretch just so happened to arch his back a little, leave his legs sprawled a little more widely, well. “And what are you thinking about enjoying in the future, Johnny?” His dark eyebrows peeked over the rim of his sunglasses, as he bounced them cheekily.

Johnny pretended to think about it. “The look on your face.”

And before Daniel can even say *huh?*, Johnny put both hands underneath the raft and lifted, flipping the other boy into the water with an almighty splash.

Yeah, the swimsuit was definitely too big for him.

Johnny vs Telephone Interference

“Bobby,” said Laura tersely, handing him the phone and turning away with a head still angled to put in her earrings. She had a lunch with her attorney, and her expression had said Johnny shouldn't ask for more information.

Johnny tucked the handset under his ear and lifted the base to carry it over to one of the lounge chairs in the living room. He glanced out the glass door to where Daniel was sitting on the edge of the pool. He had his back to him and was toweling his head vigorously, his spine and shoulder blades flexing with the movement.

“Yeah,” he said belatedly into the phone.

“Hey,” said Bobby, “you busy?”

Johnny thought: if his mom is leaving soon, they'll be alone again. It was sort of an unprecedented amount of time to have access to a bed with total privacy. If Daniel was too sore from the night before, maybe Johnny could just spend half an hour sucking him off.

“I – don't know,” he said.

“You don't know.”

“I mean, I'm not – look, what's up? It's a Saturday,” he added, because maybe Bobby forgot, maybe he didn't understand the nature of Saturdays. Who knew what college did to a person.

“I thought you wanted to figure this All Valley thing out,” said Bobby, flatly unimpressed. And, before Johnny could respond, protesting that he was still very much determined to figure it out, he continued, “Look, I talked to my dad, and he made some calls, and,” and Bobby went on like that for a bit, and it sounded like a lot of telephone calls to people from the state and that office and this one guy who knows another guy in *that* law firm.

At some point, Laura emerged again from her bedroom, fully dressed and made up for a lunch at the country club. She folded Johnny's hair back from his forehead in passing, and he glanced up to mouth *see you*, and then she was out the door. He could hear Daniel's own goodbye to her through the glass, but didn't think anything of it until the other boy appeared back inside the pool house. Johnny was slow

sometimes.

"...and the address to *that* belongs to someone named Terry Silver," said Bobby in his ear.

Johnny sat up. "Wait, that's the guy."

"Yeah, I thought it sounded familiar, like it might be the same guy you mentioned on the beach."

"Who's the guy?" said Daniel, coming closer. He reached the end of the lounge chair and set his knee down outside of Johnny's foot.

Johnny's pulse kicked up a little: danger, danger. He twisted the headset and said, "Fuck off."

"Fuck off?" asked Bobby.

Daniel cocked his head and smirked slightly. "So secretive," he murmured, and he started crawling up the length of the chair.

"Not – not you, Bobby." Johnny pressed back against the lounge chair, like he could magically slither up and over the back and be free, but Daniel had his knees around the outside of his legs and both hands free, and Johnny had never put on a shirt. "*Shit.*"

Bobby started to sound concerned. "Johnny, you okay? What's going on?"

"Look, I gotta call you back, man," he said rapidly. He shoved at Daniel's shoulder; the other boy's body was vibrating in suppressed laughter, his warm brown eyes creased and jubilant, and he *wasn't stopping*. "This afternoon, I'll – we'll do something this afternoon, okay?"

"Johnny, it's already almost one," said Bobby.

Daniel leaned in and licked a stripe up the center of his chest.

"Call you later!" said Johnny, strangled, and he hung up before either of them could give the game away and embarrass Johnny forever.

Daniel propped his chin on his chest and grinned crookedly up at him. "Boy, that call's going be a lot later."

He rose up and Johnny's lips met him halfway.

Johnny vs Surprising Affluence

“Why did we have to take one car again?” said Tommy, shifting in the backseat. It was much later in the afternoon.

He was only separated from Dutch by Jim, and the distance wasn't enough for either of them, apparently. Jim had his arms crossed over his chest, and was enduring the aggression from either side by staring up at the blue, blue sky.

“Less conspicuous,” said Bobby over his shoulder, his sandy hair whipping over his forehead from the (“too fast, Johnny”) speed and winding turns as they rose through the Los Feliz hills above Los Angeles.

“Right, because this bright red convertible is so discreet,” said Tommy.

Johnny looked at him in the rearview mirror. “In this neighborhood? Yeah, maybe.”

It wasn't that he disagreed with Tommy's point, actually; he just thought, if they needed to leave in hurry – well, he knew his girl was the best for the job.

They were from Encino, so they thought they knew wealth. But they'd never seen anything like the house Terry Silver apparently owned.

“You're fucking kidding, right,” said Dutch, hauling himself forward in the backseat to stare at the massive house overlooking the hill.

Johnny eased over to the narrow shoulder of the road, and put the Avanti into park. They all looked up at the house. It didn't even look like a home to Johnny. It looked – institutional. Like maybe it was a prison or something. Not somewhere a person would *live*.

Dutch continued, “Bobby, you seriously saying this place belongs to the guy running Cobra Kai these days? I mean, where the fuck was Sensei Kreese living, huh, Buckingham Palace?”

“That's in England,” said Jim, and then: “*Ow!*”

“I'm with Dutch,” said Johnny, looking away from the house to meet Bobby's eyes. “The guy I met was nowhere near this rich – I mean, you should've seen the piece of shit he was driving.”

“So maybe he was lying,” said Bobby, frustrated. “I'm telling you, this is where the paper trail led.”

“Yeah, but why the hell would someone who owns this, lie?” Johnny looked back at the house, because it was the kind of house you had to look at twice. “Like, why show up like that, if he's this rich? What's the point?”

“Maybe he was looking to pick up Daniel,” said Tommy darkly, from directly behind him. “Plenty of people in LA like to slum it, and I hear gays like them young.”

Silence immediately suffocated the car. Johnny didn't move, didn't look away from the house.

“What if he is a liar, though,” said Jim suddenly, after a terrible length of time. He leaned as far forward as the waist-height middle seatbelt would allow. “Guys, what if he was lying about it all – like Sensei being dead.”

No one said anything at first, but it was different silence from before. Somehow – even more uncomfortable.

“Why,” said Johnny at last. “Why would – *why*?”

He didn't think anything of it, he couldn't.

“I don't know,” said Jim, sounding uncertain; he sank back against the seat.

They all looked at the house for a while longer.

“Well,” said Dutch eventually, “is someone gonna fucking knock, or what?”

Johnny vs An Appointment He Didn't Know He Had

They walked up to the tall iron gate barring entry onto the grounds and stood looking across the wide yellow drive of pavers to the house.

“Could jump it, easy,” said Dutch, considering the gate. He reached out and gripped the bars, gave it a test shake. “Yeah, easy.”

Bobby tugged him away. “Place like this, they probably have security guards. You wanna get shot?”

“Guys, maybe this isn't a good idea,” said Jim.

Johnny ignored them all. He found the intercom on the side of the gate and pressed the button. After a few seconds, a curt voice came over the speaker, intoning *Name.*

“Say you're the Iron Duke,” said Tommy.

“Tell 'em you're John Kreese, see how the fucker likes that,” said Dutch.

Johnny irritably waved them both silent and turned back to the box. He pressed the call button and said, “We're here to see Mr. Silver. We're Cobra Kai."

He took his hand off the button and glanced over to the others, who watched him back, suddenly looking serious. Ten seconds later, the gate rattled and began to drag open, and Johnny shrugged at them.

“That was easy,” he said, and stepped through.

Johnny vs ?

“This is a surprise,” says Terry Silver, and he is smiling.

He has a lot of mouth to smile with.

He is in the Avanti, and it's the only thing he is sure of, that it's the Avanti.

“Johnny can you follow my finger?” says the girl. Andrews. “No, don't turn your head. Follow my finger with your eyes, if you can. Can you do that for me?”

It is a weird request. He blinks and focuses, or tries to, but the shifting lights and colors confuse his vision: there's too much movement in the world, the red of her hair and yellow glow of oncoming headlights, her finger going one way and the streetlights going the other, and Avanti is moving too because—

“Why are you driving my car?” Johnny asks Daniel, trying to sit forward to get a look at the other boy, who is gripping the steering wheel like he wants to rip it out. Why is Johnny in the backseat?

“Jessica,” says Daniel tightly, and her hands are on his arms, pulling him back against the seat.

“Why is he driving my car?” he asks her.

Her hands float over his arms and chest, like she wants to comfort him but doesn't know how. “Just stay still, okay? You're going to be okay. We'll be there soon.”

Johnny looks out the car, but he doesn't recognize the constellation of night lights of the neighborhood. He thought he knew every part of the valley. He used to drive down many streets.

“Where are we going?” he asks, and it could've been five seconds later, it could've been five minutes.

Johnny vs ? ?

“I'll go check in,” says Jessica just inside the bright doorway, “maybe you'll have better luck controlling him?”

“Historically, that's not really – yeah, alright,” says Daniel, and his hands are cupping Johnny's right elbow and tugging, like a little kid he's tugging at him, and he's saying, “Hey, Johnny, come over here, will you. Leave that, it's not – just come over here, sit next to me, okay.”

Johnny bumps down on the stiff waiting room chair, and a jagged fault line of pain opens up the back of his head. He shuts his eyes as the room spins and his stomach rebels.

“My head hurts,” he says into the darkness. Daniel's warm hand fumbles up his arm and carefully folds around the back of his neck.

“I know,” says Daniel quietly.

Terry Silver is reclining in a large leather chair behind a gleaming, spotless desk. He is the same man Johnny met, but somehow not. His hair is down around his face, for one, and he's wearing a silk shirt and a lot of jewelry: so much jewelry. But he doesn't look softer for any of it. He almost glitters in the sunlight coming in through the window at his back.

He doesn't look at any of the others, just Johnny. He smiles at Johnny, who says without thinking, because he is confused:

“So is it you just have shit taste in vehicles?”

The smiles grows impossibly wider, and Silver laughs. Johnny and the others stare at him, and he keeps laughing, until it gets kind of weird.

“What the fuck?” mutters Dutch at Johnny's shoulder.

“I'm the sentimental sort,” says Silver, teeth still flashing. He gestures, and the watch on his wrist catches the light. He is hard to look at, but Johnny keeps doing it. “The truck reminds me of a time before I had all this.”

“Right, well. Whatever.” Johnny lets himself feel his friends behind him. He nods at Silver. “You know Mike Barnes?”

That mouth twitches, but thankfully doesn't laugh again. “I know him,” he says easily. “He's my student.”

Johnny's hands ball into fists at his side.

“Why are we here?” asks Johnny, and he's not stupid, he gets why they brought him to the hospital, but it's only: “I want to go home. I just want to go home.”

Johnny vs ? ? ?

Silver's house is full of unexpected corners. Tightly compressed spaces open abruptly into sheer walls stretching two, three stories. But big or small, every room is just another box.

A man in a suit who obviously doesn't think much of their appearance leads them deep into the building. Johnny tries to remember the turns but quickly gives up; Bobby will take care of it.

“I don't like this,” whispers Jim, a moment before the man opens a door and ushers them in to meet the owner of the house.

“Don't be a pussy,” Dutch whispers back, and they step inside.

“Remember the bar fight in Texas,” Daniel says, rubbing his back. He's perched on the corner of his own chair, practically falling into Johnny's lap but for some reason holding back. “You fought two guys —”

“Three guys,” says Johnny, because he's pretty sure.

“No, it was two, and *I* took on – look, never mind,” and he's giving up because he knows Johnny's right, probably, “remember how you took that bottle to the head right after, and I was so sure you had a concussion?”

Johnny closes his eyes and thinks about that bar in Texas: Daniel laughing across the table, hanging on to the mechanical bull and spinning a girl through the thick crowd, the way something in his chest unclenched every time Daniel glanced over and met Johnny's eyes. Daniel could blaze across the room but it was a safely charted path, an orbit; it wasn't so bad that Johnny wasn't moving as much because he was at the center of it.

“You were beautiful,” says Johnny.

There is a short silence, and Jessica coughs from his other side. “You have that number?” she asks quietly. “I'll try calling his mom again.”

“Yeah, here. Thanks,” says Daniel.

“Can we go home please?” he asks.

“Johnny, I'm pretty sure this time, you really do have a concussion.”

It's just a word.

“You sent that guy to hurt Daniel?” says Johnny.

Silver cocks his head, expression transforming with surprise. “There seems to be some misunderstanding here.”

“We just want to know what your game is,” says Bobby, stepping up next to Johnny. He gives him a careful look, and after a moment, Johnny nods. Bobby looks back to the man. “Why are you bringing back Cobra Kai?”

“Bringing it back? It never went anywhere.”

He finally looks at them all, eyes traveling from boy to boy. He places his hands on his desk and unfolds himself from the chair, and Johnny had forgotten. The man is so tall.

“I'm sorry I never came down to the dojo to introduce myself to you all – John was a dear friend, and I wanted to give him space to run things as he saw fit. But I own Cobra Kai, I always have. In a way, you were all my students.”

“So Sensei's really dead,” says Johnny, because it's the only thing he can respond to, and Silver looks at him for a long time, expression flattening.

“What kind of man would lie about that?” he asks.

Johnny vs ? !

“*Johnny—*”

He's sitting waiting on a hospital bed, and Daniel is stepping back, and his mom is there.

“I'm fine,” says Johnny.

“Anyone else think that was a load of bullshit?” asks Tommy when they get back outside.

Johnny stands at the driver side door of the Avanti and turns to look back up at the house. He says nothing.

“Yeah, something didn't feel right,” agrees Bobby.

“Something?” Dutch snorts and hops over the side of the car. “Try everything, right down to the guy's fruity shirt.”

Silver rounds the desk and leans back on it – massive as it is, he's still somehow lowering himself to face them head-on.

He folds his arms across his chest. “Mike Barnes is a new student, he moved down from San Francisco a few months ago. He feels like he has something to prove. You all must remember how it is, when you first join Cobra Kai.”

Johnny watches him. He thinks about Daniel's black eye. He thinks about three guys breaking into a shop over an application.

“How's his knee,” he says.

“On the mend,” says Silver. He smiles faintly. “Stupid of him to risk injury before next month's tournament. I nearly kicked him out of the dojo after learning what he'd done.”

“Really.”

Silver raises his eyebrows.

“You expect us to believe that?” asks Johnny.

“You expect me to believe that?” asks Laura, and she smooths his hair back from his forehead, looks into his eyes intently. He tries to focus, and her lips pinch and fold together. She carefully pulls him into a hug.

“Thank god we're still on his insurance,” she says, and for some reason she sounds sick about it.

“John told me what went down last year,” says Silver. “The agreement he made with Mr. Miyagi. Didn't he tell you all to stay away from Daniel outside of the tournament? What makes you think I would run Cobra Kai any differently? I don't even know the boy, and I respect all my opponents.”

“Daniel's not your opponent,” says Johnny. “And he isn't fighting in that tournament.”

Daniel and Jessica are standing in front of the pottery shop talking when Johnny pulls up on the other side of the street. They both look over as he cuts the engine, and Daniel immediately lights up with a smile. When Johnny doesn't move to get out of the car for a long moment, he raises his arm and waves it, beckoning.

It's all over, he thinks again. He should be relieved.

Why isn't he relieved?

Silver raises his hands slightly. “All the more reason for Cobra Kai to not bother with him, then. Trust me, boys – what happened with Barnes was an isolated incident. It won't happen again.” He pauses.

"You know, it takes a lot of courage, coming up here to confront a complete stranger like this."

“How do you feel?” asks the doctor, shining a penlight in his eyes.

“Tired,” says Johnny.

Johnny vs !

“Hey,” calls Daniel, waving. “You're late.”

Johnny steps out onto the street. Up the block, something streaks around the corner; it catches at the corner of his eye, because it's red and moving fast.

It might look a little like the Avanti, if you don't know anything about cars.

“After what happened with John, I'm trying to make it right.”

It might've meant something, if it was Sensei standing there saying it to them.

“It can be hard out there at your age. You need a place that understands you. Anytime you boys feel like coming back to Cobra Kai – the door is always open. You can come home.”

Johnny can almost picture it, the steady solidity of Sensei's stance, his presence. He wouldn't sound cloying or like he was even trying to persuade them – more like, he was offering you the facts of the situation, and leaving it up to you to make the right decision. There was usually only one decision, one right answer.

Silver sounds nothing like this. He sounds like he cares.

“Is he going to be okay?” asks Daniel. He is standing far away on the other side of the room, and holding his elbows tightly. His eyes are huge.

“Brain injuries can be unpredictable,” says the doctor. “But most likely – he just needs to rest.”

To Johnny's surprise, it's Bobby who replies. He puts his hand on

Johnny's shoulder and pulls lightly and says, “With all due respect, sir – fuck Cobra Kai.”

He pulls at Johnny's shoulder, and they all step back. Under Silver's pale gaze, it feel less like a walk-out than a retreat.

Johnny pauses in the middle of the street to let the car pass, but it doesn't pass – it slows. Just enough.

He sees Daniel's face fall a split second before the Goomba yells something and swings the bat.

Johnny vs ! ?

“You really think that Silver guy was friends with Sensei?” asks Jim from the backseat. “They're nothing alike.”

No one responds.

“Do you think he meant what he said?” continues Jim. “About the dojo, I mean.”

“Guy like that, does it matter?” says Tommy.

“His car's out in the lot,” says Daniel, anxiously pacing by their side as his mom walks Johnny down the hallway of the hospital. “I drove us here in it – it was right there, and I don't know, I thought maybe he'd be less freaked out if he was in the Avanti,” and he keeps talking like Johnny isn't right there, like he can't hear him.

“Daniel, it's fine,” she says. “Why don't you drive it home – are you okay to drive it home? Do you want someone to come get you?”

Daniel glances between her and Johnny, who blinks back at him.

“No, I – I can drive it home. That's fine.”

“He just needs to rest,” she says.

“Right,” says Daniel. "Of course."

“So that's it, right?” says Dutch when Johnny drops them all back at their cars. “End of story, Cobra Kai's being run by some weirdo who can't control his own fucking student?”

“I guess,” says Bobby, frowning.

“Nothing for us to worry about, then. Cobra Kai is as good as dead – I bet that prick doesn't even last a year. Who would want to train with him?"

“You couldn't pay me to,” says Tommy.

“Johnny?” says Jim, and Johnny looks away from the steering wheel. They're all looking at him.

“Yeah,” he says, “Guess it's over.”

The blow knocks him from himself, the pain and surprise so encompassing he forgets what has happened the moment after it happens, and he doesn't know who he is or why he feels this pain, and he thinks with distinct clarity *I was hit* and he remembers enough about being himself to feel scared, and in the meantime, he has fallen to the ground in the middle of the street.

He doesn't catch himself. In that moment, he isn't someone who ever learned how to fall.

It's the space in between the thoughts that are the worst: they appear and quickly grow, blotting out the light of being a person with the smog of pain.

Daniel bends to look at him through the window of Laura's car and watches as Johnny fumbles with the seatbelt; it takes him three tries to get it clicked home.

“I'll come by tomorrow, okay,” says Daniel. “Maybe I'll bring you some of Mr. Miyagi's soup or something. Nothing that man's soup can't fix.”

“Call you later?” asks Johnny, after a moment. He looks out at him.

Daniel smiles: a quick, pained stretch of his lips. “Think you'll probably be sleeping, man.”

“Oh,” says Johnny.

Johnny vs ! ? ?

After leaving the guys, Johnny drives around for a while. He told Daniel earlier he'd meet up with him at the shop and maybe go catch a movie or something. He still has a little time, though; the sun is only just beginning to set.

He drives a little aggressively, taking corners at sharp angles and once or twice cutting someone off in traffic. All the tension of the past few hours has built up in his body and it has no place to go.

Was that it? Was that really it, everything he's been worrying about and planning his movements around, and it was just a misbehaving student? Even if Silver is lying, Barnes and his friends haven't come around again.

It's like Johnny tilted his head and spotted a completely different image from the same drawing he's been staring at for weeks.

He flushes and hits the accelerator, speeding to pass a Jeep in front of him.

Did he blow this whole situation completely out of proportion? Because he has nothing else to do with his time, because he needed the distraction. Worse yet, had he wanted there to be some big conspiracy threatening Daniel?

Had he *needed* there to be a threat, just so he could feel useful?

He almost passes out of the valley before he realizes it has gotten dark, and he needs to turn around and meet Daniel.

Johnny vs ! ? ? ?

"Daniel," he calls, as the other boy turns away from the car. Daniel pauses and looks back at him, questioning, and Johnny asks, "Did you see who did it?"

It's hard to make out his expression. Johnny's vision isn't too good right now, and the parking lot light is at Daniel's back.

"Don't worry about that right now, okay?" says Daniel finally. He glances around before bending. He ducks through the window and presses cool lips to Johnny's cheek. He withdraws before Johnny can turn his face into the kiss. "It's gonna be alright, Johnny."

"Okay," says Johnny, agreeing, and he tries to watch him walk away, but he's so tired.

The next time he blinks and looks up, his mom is getting in the car, and Daniel is gone.

Daniel vs The Care of Something Precious

Daniel sat for a long time in the Avanti, not moving to drive out of the hospital lot even though he knew the parking rate was priced by the half-hour and he should get going before he owed more than the cash in his pockets. He was exaggerating, probably; it was something he remembered his mom complaining about years back. *Those damn hospital parking rates, don't those people have any kind of heart?*

He wished Jessica had stuck around, just so he wouldn't be alone in the car. He's never been alone in the Avanti before. Somehow felt more risky, like something bad would happen to it if it was just Daniel in the car, because bad luck kind of followed him around sometimes. And where would he be then, having to face Johnny in the morning and explain. Sorry you entrusted your car to the wrong guy. Not that Johnny did, really. He didn't seem to know what he was doing, or what anyone was doing.

If he did mess the Avanti up, Johnny might not even understand what he was trying to say when he told him. Or maybe he'd get it, because it was the Avanti, and the look on his face would be—

He was kind of terrifyingly open in the emergency room.

Daniel had never seen him like that before: when he was a little drunk, maybe. But drunk was different. One was blurred, this was raw. Raw and confused, and he kept trying to pull himself together but he *couldn't*, and all Daniel could do was sit there and watch.

He hated sitting and watching. Maybe more than anything in the world.

“Alright, alright,” he said, and he felt stupid because it wasn't like he was speaking to anybody. He turned the ignition and lifted his hips to get at his wallet.

Whatever Johnny was doing before he came to meet Daniel at the shop, he hadn't been buying gas, that was for sure. Daniel made it maybe five blocks before he glanced down at the gauge and swore.

He probably ate up a lot of gas just driving to the hospital. He drove

kind of fast and neither he nor Jessica knew exactly where the nearest one was because neither of them were locals, and Johnny was no help; every time they asked if he knew, he just shook his head and asked *why, what's wrong?*

Be a fine thing, if Daniel ran out of gas in a neighborhood he didn't really know. Thankfully he found an Amoco after another quarter-mile, the little red flame swirling up from the oval sign in a way that always reminded him of Aladdin's lamp for some reason.

Daniel eased the Avanti up to a pump and breathed out in relief, and then he thought of Johnny running out of gas on purpose in the middle of fucking nowhere like a weird moron, and the sigh turned into a ragged wet gasp, and he had to sit with his fist hard against his mouth, waiting for it to pass.

“Fill her up?” asked the technician, and Daniel glanced up at him and gave a quick nod. Five seconds later, he remembered the contents of his wallet and twisted wildly in his seat, saying, wait, sorry – I got $3.50, okay? Three-fifty worth. The technician shrugged and saluted. It was all the same to him.

Anyway, he got the Avanti a little of what she needed, that was the important thing.

Daniel vs Everything

Daniel piloted the Avanti home with hands numb from frantic care. It was only when he pulled into the lot in front of the house that he was able to un-pry his fingers from around the wheel, and then it was like his whole body woke up with complaints of how tense he'd been – hours of it, and what good did it do. But at least he was home.

Except he couldn't bring himself to get out of the car. He sat in the dark yard: the light from the house spilling towards him but not quite reaching, not quite able to draw him to the safety waiting inside like it normally would.

He wondered if Johnny and his mom were back at the pool house yet, if Johnny was sleeping. Asleep, he probably looked pretty normal. He probably looked like he could wake up and be himself again. Daniel wished he was there to see it.

“Nice wheels.”

He jerked in his seat and stared up at Mr. Miyagi who had come out of the house at some point while he was stuck frozen in the car.

Mr. Miyagi didn't notice. He studied the Avanti with honest interest; this was probably the first time he actually got a close look at it, Daniel realized. Johnny was usually hanging around, being himself. Between his protectiveness over the car and Mr. Miyagi's self-contained reserve, there had been little chance of them bonding. Daniel should do a better job with that.

He cleared his throat and said, “Yeah, it – it sure is something. You should talk to Johnny about it sometime, he,” and he had to stop. That wasn't going to work. He couldn't.

“Daniel-san?”

“I'll need your help tomorrow, to go pick up the Ford,” he said quietly, staring down at the dark dashboard. “It's parked behind the shop.”

The man didn't say anything, and in the stretch of silence, it all started to boil up inside him. He felt pummeled with it, wild and off-balance. His breath came hard and short, and his eyes burned.

Why was this happening? He could so easily see how his life was

supposed to be, and he was working to make it happen – that was hard enough without this insane bullshit coming down on him every other week. It wasn't fair, and it was the kind of unfair that made him choke on it: on life and the world and the vast cosmic forces that seemed to think Daniel wasn't supposed to be happy. Bruises he could handle. His own pain, he could handle. But watching it happen to Johnny—

“Mr. Miyagi, those guys from before, the ones who broke into the shop. They – they came back. And they hurt Johnny. Real bad.” He looked up at him, meeting his eyes, and tried to keep his breathing measured, his expression calm but clear because he needed, he needed the man to understand him just then.

Mr. Miyagi looked down at him. The lines of his face abruptly released, shifting into plain dismay at whatever he saw. He opened his mouth.

“And they're not going to stop,” said Daniel, despairing. He pounded the steering wheel and bowed his head. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Mr. Miyagi, but I have to fight in that stupid tournament and,” his voice broke and he sucked in a rough breath, and Mr. Miyagi said *Daniel-san*, “and I really need you to train me, okay, I'm *sorry* – but I don't think I have it in me to do it on my own. I tried, and I even had some help but it just – it just wasn't the same. I'm not built like that, I wish I was, I—”

“Daniel-san," he said again.

With effort, he made himself stop talking.

Mr. Miyagi reached down and lifted the door handle. He pulled the Avanti open and stood back. “Come inside. Tell Miyagi everything.”

It was the sudden dizzying relief that was going to kill him. He stared up at the man without moving; then his mouth hooked into a shaky smile.

“You should know better then to give me an opening like that,” he said. He twisted to get out of the car; his legs felt a little unsteady, like someone learning to stand for the first time.

Mr. Miyagi shut the door with some finality and nodded at him. “Daniel-san know – Miyagi have very good selective hearing.”

Daniel vs Gotta Get Up, Gotta Get Out

The sun rose over the garden fence and made its way through the shoji screen, lighting up the far wall of his room with floating boxes of pale light, and Daniel was not yet out of bed.

He was awake, and his eyes were open. He watched the room with a dreamy but disinterested mind, taking care not to alight too hard on any particular thought or detail. It was a little like mediating or doing a kata.

(He wondered if this was what mornings were like for Johnny: heavy body drawing his thoughts slowly back together from whatever far-flung place they scattered at night.)

Well, so much for not thinking about anything. The ruse was blown, the jig was up. Daniel was awake and across the valley, Johnny was still hurt.

He sighed and rolled onto his back, pulled his pillow over his face to block out the light of the room. He breathed in his own hot air for a few moments, pretending he was fine with lungs full of carbon dioxide. Maybe he could get back to meditation this way. Worth a shot. Daniel was willing to try anything once.

He didn't remember a whole lot about the early part of his dad's sickness. He was so little at the time; he could never say this to his ma, because it would probably kill her, but sometimes in his memory it was like his dad had always been sick. Like even before anyone knew it, before he started having those dizzy spells or lost the weight, it was already there inside him. Waiting. Daniel was beginning to think things that want to hurt you can wait a long time if necessary.

All the same, he thought he remembered the morning after they first told him about it: when he was first made to understand it was something that maybe wouldn't be going away. He couldn't remember what they said – how do you explain death to a kid? How do you transmit a conception of life as something that is limited to someone for whom every day feels new and boundless? But he remembered he woke up and didn't want to get out of bed. It felt safer to stay asleep. In his sleep nothing was real, everything was fantastical and he could do *anything*.

In his fitful dreams the night before, Daniel hadn't felt like he could do

anything. Life passed in flashes, none of them promising, and Johnny was always falling to the ground. And Daniel just stood and watched.

He wasn't supposed to just watch; that wasn't the kind of person he thought he was, who he always tried to be. If he could go toe-to-toe with Johnny when he was being a bully, surely he could do the same now, when he was hurt. Okay, that didn't make any sense even in his own head, but his throat went tight with frustration anyway. What was he doing about all this? Besides lying in bed.

He didn't want to get up. What would getting up do? He'd go see Johnny – it was still just going to be a lot of standing around watching.

But from the door: a light tap on the wood.

“Daniel-san awake?” asked Mr. Miyagi through the screen.

Daniel dragged the pillow off his head and took a deep breath of fresh air. He glared dry-eyed at the ceiling and only belatedly remembered to call, “Yeah.”

Mr. Miyagi's tone went brisk. “Five minutes brooding, but then – kata. Breakfast. And we go to shop.”

It sounded so straightforward and obvious when he said it.

“At lunch, Daniel-san bring some yokukansan over to friend,” he continued.

Daniel's eyebrows pinched together and he angled his head to the door to ask, “What's yokuka...”

“Tea for head,” was the stout reply, and: “Five minutes brooding, then Daniel-san and Miyagi do kata.”

Daniel thought about that: five more minutes alone with his own thoughts? No thanks.

He threw off his blanket and got up.

Daniel vs Waiting

“Oh,” said Laura that afternoon, “Daniel, I'm glad you're here.”

He slid the door shut after himself and looked across to where she was standing at the kitchen counter, pen in hand. “You are? I mean – of course, what do you need?”

“I'm about to head over and talk to the police, and I just.” She shook her head, knocking loose a long sheaf of blonde hair, which fell down in front of her face. She shut her eyes and asked, a little strained, “*Snake*, you said?”

Daniel shifted on his feet, wincing a little. “Yeah. I – I'm sorry Mrs. Lawrence, but I swear, okay, I *swear* that's what they call him. I don't know any other name.... He's friends with another guy named Mike,” he added. “The cops should already have the report I made about them.”

She opened her eyes and looked down at her notepad with a thoroughly blank expression. “Snake and Mike. And a red Mustang.”

Johnny could probably tell her the year of the car, if he'd seen it. If he remembered it. Daniel opened his mouth to say this; immediately thought better of it; shut his mouth and ducked his head. He slid a look to the closed bedroom door off the side of the main room.

“How is he?” he asked.

At his question, Laura tucked her hair behind her ear and glanced up, distracted. “Mostly? He's sleeping. When he's not, he's very cranky. He's less confused though, thank god. Look, if he wakes up while I'm gone, could you make him eat something? Toast or something, just – anything.” She slid her notepad into her purse and paused, looking at him with abrupt focus. “If he's a jerk, please don't take it personally. He doesn't handle being injured very well.”

He nodded, a little startled for some reason. He hadn't really thought of it like that. In his experience, a moody Johnny was kind of just a normal Johnny. What was he going to do, be *more* quiet?

“I'll be back in an hour or so, okay?” she said.

“Yeah, hope they keep you waiting less long than they did me,” he

said, turning as she passed and brushed a light hand over his shoulder.

Laura gave him one last, brief smile and left, and then he was alone in the pool house.

Daniel dug the baggie of tea out of his pocket and tossed it over on the kitchen counter. He looked around the room, chewing the corner of his mouth. He looked again at the bedroom door and tried to remember how much of a jerk Johnny was that one time in Texas. Mostly Daniel just remembered sweating a lot and the other boy lying around almost naked and kind of charmingly pathetic.

Anyway, he didn't come over here just to sit out here by himself. He kind of needed to see Johnny, see that he was okay with his own two eyes.

The lights were off in the bedroom, and the window blinds tightly shut. The figure on the bed didn't move at all at the new spill of light, but Daniel closed the door anyway.

He slipped off his shoes and crossed to the wall so he could crawl up the inside of the bed without disturbing the other boy. He hovered on his hands and knees and let his eyes adjust to the dim lighting, peering down at Johnny.

Johnny was down to his boxers and on his side, facing out. He was uncharacteristically curled up instead of sprawled out, like he thought he was sleeping in the Avanti or something. Daniel couldn't quite make out his expression, but he thought it looked a little tense. He wondered if his head hurt even in his dreams.

He didn't really know what else to do but shuffle down onto his own side. He didn't want to disturb Johnny's sleep by trying to spoon him, but he couldn't help but reach out and press the pads of his fingers against the warm smooth length of his back, which slowly rose and fell with his breath. That little point of contact was good, Daniel could be content with that, he thought.

He settled in to wait.

Daniel vs Risky Business, 1:15 PM

He didn't fall asleep, but between the darkness and the steady, reassuring sound of Johnny's breathing, he did reach a sort of peaceful mental plateau. He pictured himself lying atop one of those mesas they saw in the distance when they were driving through the Mojave. It was quiet and serene, at least until Johnny jerked violently and half sat up.

His hand immediately went to his head and he breathed out a heartfelt, "*Fuck.*"

"Whoa, hey," said Daniel. Johnny jumped and twisted around, and he put out a steadying hand, saying again, because it really bore repeating: "Whoa."

"What – Daniel?" He rubbed his face and squinted around the room and then down at him. "Time is it?"

Daniel came up on his knees and took the hand from his face, partly so he could hold it, partly so he could look at him properly. Johnny's eyes moved over him, and he belatedly said, "Oh, uh – I don't know. Afternoon? Maybe around one – hey, *what*—"

Because Johnny was pulling away and standing up. He wavered a second, hands going out from his sides as if for balance. Then he started unerringly for the door, and Daniel had to scramble off the bed to follow.

"Jesus, would you slow down," he said, as the other boy yanked open the bedroom door and rocketed out into the other room. He followed close on his heels. "What's your deal, could you take it easy? You're going to spill your brains all over the place if you're not careful."

Johnny made it three steps before he had to stop, swaying again. He bowed his head, clamping his eyes shut.

"My head hurts," he gritted out.

"No shit." Daniel took him by the shoulders and steered him over to one of the lounge chairs. Before he could helpfully nudge him, though, Johnny pushed him roughly away. A second later his legs folded and he thumped awkwardly down in the chair. He grimaced again.

“Why's it so bright it here?” he asked. Head in hands again.

“I said it was the afternoon, remember?” Panic spiked through Daniel, and he fell to his knees in front of the chair, peering hard at his face. “Do you remember?”

Confused blue eyes cracked up and looked at him. “Remember what?”

“That it's the afternoon.” He reached up, thinking to pry an eyelid all the way open and check matters out for himself.

“You literally just said that.” He batted away Daniel's questing hand. “Stop that.”

“I'm trying to look at your pupils, man.”

“They're fine,” said Johnny, closing his eyes again. “Just – shut up a moment, will you. Let me think.”

And any other time, Daniel would probably crack a joke about how he knew it was hard for him sometimes. As it was, he sat back on his ankles, stymied. He studied Johnny's pained face for a moment, feeling lost. Then!

“Oh, you know what? Here,” he said, and he fumbled for the sunglasses still hooked into his shirt collar.

Johnny jerked slightly back at the first careful brush of the frames against his temples, but once he realized what they were, he settled and let it happen. He breathed out long and slow: a gust of warm air against Daniel's wrists. And Daniel couldn't see when he opened his eyes again because of the opaque black lens, but he thought he could tell by the way Johnny's shoulders relaxed slightly.

“Hi,” said Daniel, a little anxious.

Johnny's flattened mouth stretched into a slight, complicated smile. “Hi,” he said, and he sounded like himself. The confused little boy from the previous night was gone.

Daniel folded forward into his lap, hugging him around the middle. He turned his cheek against the other boy's cotton-covered thigh and said nothing, because there was a million things he needed to say, like *are you okay* and *I'm so fucking sorry* and *this is all my fault* and *do you want some toast?* But for the moment, he didn't want to touch any of that. He just wanted to be here with him.

So he remained silent and held on tight.

Daniel vs Risky Business, 1:25 PM

Johnny didn't want to sit back in the lounge chair. He chose instead to sit on the end of it, feet braced wide like he might need to spring up at any moment. He put his elbows on his knees and brooded, and meanwhile, Daniel made him toast.

Daniel restlessly tapped his fingers on the counter and watched the coils of the toaster turn a glowing hot orange.

“Where'd my mom go?” asked Johnny.

He glanced over. “Oh, she,” and something made him not mention the police. He didn't know if he just didn't want to remind Johnny of the whole incident, or if he was being a coward: if he didn't want to remind him that Daniel had said it was all taken care of, that police were going to handle it. “She had an errand to run, said she'd be back in a bit,” he said.

In response to this, Johnny's expression didn't change. He didn't move.

Daniel shifted on his feet and glared at the toaster. This was a rich person toaster, wasn't it? Shouldn't it work faster or something? It was the eighties, for christ's sake, shouldn't he have two slices of perfectly golden bread in like twenty seconds? Appliance manufacturers were really resting on their laurels.

He turned to the fridge to grab some butter and was confronted with another problem. He picked up the foil-covered stick, making a face. He looked over his shoulder to say something – *so you're that kind of household, huh, following the health fads* – but at the sight of Johnny's stony face, he shut his mouth. And he shut the fridge door.

Whatever, it wasn't like he was eating the toast. Johnny was clearly used to margarine.

“Okay, grub's up,” he announced, returning to the lounge chair with a plate in hand. The toast was a little burnt along the edge, but that wasn't his fault, he'd only used the setting the toaster was already on; maybe Johnny and his mom liked their toast a little crispy, who knew. The sickly yellow square of margarine was slowly liquidating; he scraped the disgusting stuff around the bread and then presented the plate to Johnny like he was giving him something priceless.

He took it without saying anything. Looked down at it but didn't move to eat.

Daniel perched behind him on the chair. He wanted to shuffle closer, maybe press up against his bare back – but something about the way Johnny was holding himself stopped him. So Daniel sat on his hands and waited.

After a moment, Johnny's head turned slightly, like he was listening.

“Did you see?” he asked quietly, looking ahead at the wall. “Who did it, I mean.”

Daniel swallowed hard. His gaze drifted up to the ceiling and he said carefully, “Look, don't – don't worry about that right now, okay? You should just focus on, on resting and getting better.”

On the edges of his vision, he thought he saw Johnny's hands curl.

“I have a headache, not brain damage,” said Johnny.

“Well, actually, a concussion *is*—”

“So how about you stop talking to me like I'm a fucking kid, and tell me who did this.”

And it wasn't what he said so much as how he said it: uncompromising and kind of angry, and he didn't even know the truth yet.

For probably the hundredth time in the past eighteen hours, Daniel felt a helpless sort of fury. He'd signed the damn application, hadn't he? They were supposed to back off. That was the agreement, or so he'd thought. But if that wasn't the agreement, if those guys were going to keep targeting Daniel and the people he cared about – what was he supposed to do about that? The only thing more senseless than a world where interpersonal problems were solved by karate tournaments was apparently one where they *weren't*.

Johnny twisted around and looked at him; beneath the dark lenses he was completely unreadable, which was its own flavor of immovable.

“My head's,” said Johnny, and then he stopped, mouth flinching. He tried again: “Last night's a mess. I need facts. To pin it all down.”

And so Daniel told him, “It's my fault.”

For a long moment Johnny didn't react, and then his shoulders blades turned and jutted as he hunched further over his knees and he said, “Don't freak out about me doubting your abilities or whatever, but I don't think you could do this even if you wanted to.”

Daniel sighed. “I meant—”

“I know what you meant,” he said.

“They wouldn't have gone after you if it wasn't for me,” he said quietly.

Johnny unfolded slowly from the lounge chair, and Daniel looked at the smooth, easy flex of his abdomen, the strong brace of his legs. It was a strange moment of double vision, the kind you can get with love when you can look at someone so strong but only see endless vulnerability. Johnny should've looked ridiculous, wearing nothing but a pair of boxers and sunglasses, but the last thing Daniel felt like doing was smiling or laughing.

Johnny turned in place, looking all around the room with a remote expression. “So it was those guys again.”

Daniel rubbed at the leg of his jeans and made a face at the abandoned plate of toast. “Yeah. But look – I'm going to take care of it, okay? Your mom is talking to the cops, and with both our reports – what?” Because Johnny was shaking his head.

“The cops can't do anything about those guys. You should've told her not to bother.”

“What makes you say that?” demanded Daniel. He kind of agreed, the police were useless, but since that was the option he'd told Johnny he'd gone with, he was a little offended at the implication that it was a bad one.

“Did anyone call Bobby?” asked Johnny instead of answering.

“Bobby? Why would I call Bobby?” said Daniel blankly.

He thought about Bobby Brown, and what Bobby Brown was willing to do for Johnny, and he didn't want to call him even a little bit. Even if the guy didn't end up blaming Daniel for this mess, he couldn't be

trusted not to take things too far in retaliating. Bobby was the most dangerous student in Cobra Kai; he made people think the dojo was reasonable and *normal*. He talked a real good game at being a decent person right up until he jumped and took out your knee. At least Johnny came at people openly, without deception.

He'd forgiven Johnny because Johnny had been a confused, twisted up kid. He never had the impression that Bobby was confused about a damn thing.

But Daniel rallied. “I mean, no – should I? What should – uh. What do you want me to tell him?”

Johnny's mouth flattened and he shook his head slightly. “Never mind. I'll call him later.”

“The doctor said using the telephone might be difficult,” he said, in case he didn't remember; Johnny had been pretty out of it the night before.

He focused on him, mouth twisting in irritation. “What, you think I'm too dumb to use a telephone now?”

“I didn't say that,” snapped Daniel. And then he pressed his hands over his face and said into his palms, “Oh my god, can we please not fight? I came over here to look after you, see that you're okay—”

“I'm fine.”

“Don't be stupid.”

They looked at each other. Johnny stepped around the lounge chair, and Daniel rose to his feet to meet him squarely. His heart was pounding, and he felt a little sick. He didn't understand anything that was happening, how this was suddenly going so wrong.

I was so scared last night, he wanted to say, but it felt impossible to form the words with the other boy looking at him like that. One instinct clashed with another, and the fact was, once upon a time, Daniel didn't come out so great after showing weakness to a looming Johnny.

“Why are you being like this?” he asked, searching his face fruitlessly. “I feel responsible for all this, don't you get that?”

Johnny's expression flinched for a moment, but quickly firmed. He

ducked his head and his fringe fell forward, hiding his eyes as he reached up and slid the sunglasses off his face.

He pressed them lightly to Daniel's chest and said quietly, “Not everything is about you. And I don't need looking after.”

And, as Daniel was still fumbling to catch the sunglasses with nerveless fingers, Johnny stepped past him and went back into his room.

The door shut, and Daniel flinched at the sound. He stood alone in the empty room for several minutes after, wondering what just happened.

Johnny vs The Absence of Most Things

He sat on the edge of his bed in the dark and waited for Daniel to leave the pool house. He tried putting his head in his hands again, but he found when he moved his neck that way, it hurt more. So he gripped the edge of the mattress and closed his eyes and waited.

Time passed, or it didn't.

The edges of his thoughts were ragged, burned off and ending, crumbling to nothing like someone had taken a blowtorch to his head. From the empty came an idea: he needed to call Bobby. Another: he forgot to kiss Daniel. Dispatches from the front, rerouted through enemy lines and jumbled. His troops were given conflicting orders and didn't know what to do, so he did nothing.

From the other room: the door sliding open and shut, maybe. Daniel left. Probably for the best, it wasn't like Johnny could really talk to him, or do anything right now. He should come back when Johnny was a person again.

He should put on clothes.

He didn't move to put on clothes.

He should go eat that toast. Daniel made it for him.

He didn't move to eat the toast. Daniel wasn't there to disappoint.

It meant something that those same guys who came after Daniel came after him. The timing. Terry Silver. He needed to call Bobby.

He didn't move to call Bobby.

He had so much to do, and also absolutely nothing to do; the world outside this room would still keep going, so what did it matter. He should just sit here. It didn't make a difference what he did, it never had, and anyway, he couldn't. Maybe it was always leading to this, his whole life. His final resting state: here, unmoving and unthinking in the dark. Finally, something he was meant for.

In his head, Terry Silver's wide smile and odd, pale eyes: tracking them as they left his study.

He should've kissed Daniel.

He needed to call Bobby.

He didn't move.

Laura & Reading Between the Lines

So after she made her report to the police and spent fifty minutes getting patronized by every passing twinkle-eyed bozo with a badge who mysteriously needed to talk to the desk sergeant *that very moment*; after she stopped by the country club to tell Patricia what had happened and ask her what she remembered about post-concussion care from her time as a nurse; after she stopped by the shop to pick up two bottles of Riesling but *not* the pack of Nat Shermans she spends five minutes considering; and after she drove home and got cut off on the last turn by a very familiar black Rolls Royce – Laura found her son sitting slumped over the kitchen table.

“Daniel have to go back to work?” she asked, bustling inside to drop her packages on the counter. She turned and cast a critical look around the room, taking in Johnny's lack of clothes and dark expression. She sighed. “Please tell me you ate something, at least.”

“Daniel made toast,” he muttered.

“That toast?” she said, indicating the plate over on the lounge chair. “The toast currently not eaten?”

“Wasn't hungry.”

She decided to leave it for the moment. She turned back around and started unpacking the grocery sacks. “How are you feeling?”

“I can't remember Bobby's number.” She paused and turned back around. Johnny looked up at her through his fringe, and he bit his lip. “I tried and it just, it wasn't there. Guess I should feel lucky I even got the area code right.”

She stepped up to the table and carefully folded his hair back from his forehead. “Honey, you hit your head last night. It hasn't even been a day. Okay? The doctor said things would be a little jumbled. It's just temporary.”

He leaned into her, even as his eyes flickered down and away. “What if it's not, though.”

It was a mother's job not too indulge such catastrophic thinking, even if she was privately panicking along the exact same path. She dipped down and pressed a kiss to his forehead before turning back to the

counter, and the junk drawer.

“That's why we have address books,” she said, handing him hers, the page already open to the B names.

Johnny winced and pulled the handset away from his ear at first. The dial tone, she thought. Maybe the dial tone was unpleasant.

He was slow and methodical in checking the number and punching in the numbers. When he caught her watching he scowled and hunched his shoulders, turning away like he could hide the conversation from her ears if his face was hidden. If he was more sure on his feet, she knew he would've taken the phone and retreated into his bedroom.

She'd feel more inclined to give him privacy and go into her own room if he wasn't clearly wrapped up in some bad business.

“Hey, Bobby?” said Johnny into the phone, like he was unsure.

She should've grilled Daniel more. That kid would probably crack under very little pressure. She didn't think he'd lied to her, but she did think there was more to the story than what he'd told. She wasn't exactly sure how to deal with that.

If a girl had dragged her baby into trouble, would she be reacting differently right now? Would she be as patient or gracious, if it was a girl, if she wasn't scared of sending the wrong signal to Johnny? She didn't know the rules of this situation, and her worry about making the wrong move was making her stand completely still. It was like the past several years with Sid all over again.

“Yeah, look – remember what you said, about coming to you? If something happened?” And Johnny stopped talking, like he was actually waiting for confirmation. “Well, something happened.”

Maybe she should just ask her son what the hell was going on.

Johnny vs The Shame of it All

He was slow in replacing the handset, and not just because everything about him was slow now. His mom was still standing nearby. She'd heard the whole conversation, what little there was of it, and she was waiting with her arms folded.

“He's got a big paper due tonight,” said Johnny. “Said he'll come over tomorrow.”

“You didn't tell him about your injury,” observed Laura.

He lifted one shoulder in a slight shrug. “No point. He's got a big paper due tonight.”

He turned and sat down again on the lounge chair in the middle of the room. After a moment, he leaned over – slow again – and dragged the plate with the toast closer. The first bite was brittle and loud, crunching in his mouth and something deeper in his head answering back, no thanks. He sighed and shoved the plate away again. Rubbed his brow.

Laura was still watching him. He glanced up and met her eyes.

“What,” he said.

“I know your head hurts,” she said, and she crouched down in front of him like he was a little kid again, like he was standing in front of his new school and didn't want to leave her to go inside, never mind what she said about making friends. He didn't get what was so great about the idea of friends back then.

He tried to look away, but she carefully took hold of his chin, made him meet her eyes, which was a lot like meeting his own eyes except hers liked what they saw.

“But Johnny, I really need you to explain what happened. This is about more than just Daniel's black eye now. I don't care what the Valley is like, people don't do things like this over a karate tournament. They do it for – money, or drugs, or something worse. I need to know what you've gotten yourself involved in.”

“But it is about the karate tournament,” he said. “Or – I mean, it is, but it isn't. Because of last year, when I was – I was all messed up.”

He didn't know if she remembered; he hadn't spent a lot of time at home last year. Many nights, he crashed over at Bobby's or Tommy's (and once, but never again: Dutch's).

“So – this is about Daniel?” she asked, and her tone was as careful as her expression; as careful as the light touch of her fingers; as careful as the love of a mom who didn't realize what her son had done. He wished this was happening some other time, any other time. If they were going to talk about this, he wanted to be able to look at her and memorize how she looked at him before she knew. Way his head was now, he didn't know what would stay.

“It's about what we did to him,” said Johnny.

Johnny vs Speech vs Thought

He said:

he thought:
(nothing) *We fought a lot last year,*
(nothing) *before the tournament.*
No, don't you dare
You coward
I was the one who
but what if
she regrets trying?
It's just, he fought back and I told (nothing)
myself that made it fair. (nothing)
if someone can take
it from you, was it ever
really yours?
if it can be taken,
And it wasn't fair.
to have it?
daniel on the beach
wasn't a threat
But he got back anyway,
Something in johnny just knew:
This kid was going to take
everything from him.

Sensei knows,
but he doesn't have to take
it to you to tell him.
You all agreed,
against the house.
Sensei told me
night ends,
(nothing) I hurt him.
(nothing) Daniel still won.
and they will still have won
(nothing)

Many nights that fall, he crashed
over at daniel's, or tommy's
so that he didn't have to think about what it all meant.
when he hid out, hiding
how much
the weight around his neck

(nothing)
After he gives Jesus everything.
Everything.
He was all over The dojo, his life.
So for him to be a better boyfriend
and take care of his own shit.
He'll do anything for him.

Johnny vs Knowledge of Self

"What would you have done," she asked, "if Daniel hadn't won?"

He thought about it. It was very hard to think, always, but especially just then. Especially about this.

"I don't know," he said.

Johnny vs Forcing the Point

She shifted in her crouch, not withdrawing from him, but – he couldn't tell. She was feeling some way, and he couldn't read it. He held very still and waited.

“Was this a regular thing?” she asked. “I mean, the – the bullying, was that what you were learning at that place?” Her lashes were down as she spoke, and her voice sounded very even like it did when they encountered Sid outside and she wanted to not let on she was bothered.

“I don't know,” he said. And he didn't know if he was trying to explain or excuse or maybe just push it more in her face, so she'd have no other choice but to react some way, but he added: “Sensei said that's what strength was, when no one can stop you.”

He watched her skin go pale beneath her makeup, turning the powder stark and obvious: a mask sitting atop tired human pain.

“I'm sorry,” he said quickly, fingers twitching between his knees. “I don't – I don't think that anymore.”

“If that man was still alive,” she murmured, but she didn't finish the thought, and he didn't prompt her to complete the sentence because he didn't know how he felt about it, even now. And he felt guilty for that. A better person would know how to feel. Confusion was as good as weakness, and he's been confused a lot this past year.

“Daniel doesn't act like someone who was ever hurt by you,” she said after a moment.

“Yeah, well. He's,” and he didn't know what to say, how to explain what Daniel was, because what wasn't he. Johnny thought Daniel's hormones could probably bring world peace if someone could figure out how to use them. “I apologized, months ago. He seemed okay with it.”

“And you?” She cleared her throat and looked up at him; the skin around her eyes seemed a little tense, but her gaze was clear. “Are you okay with it, Johnny? Or is – I mean. You're not with him out of some sense of guilt or something, are you?”

His brow pinched. “Uh.” What a weird question. “No.”

“Okay,” she said, nodding even as she still sounded a little unsure. “Good. Because that's no basis for a relationship.”

He couldn't exactly say that he really did just like sucking Daniel's dick, so he said, “We do kata together sometimes.” And then he frowned, because it seemed like had been a while since they did, actually. He tried to remember the last time, and couldn't.

“Okay,” she said again. She didn't get it.

He tried again. “His karate, it's different. And when I do it, I can be – not a different person but,” a different me, “better.”

Her slim hand came up and curved around his restless fingers, squeezing the tips until he went still. “Okay,” she said, one more time, and then she stood. He hung on and looked up at her, and her mouth flattened and stretched into a small not-smile. She said clearly, “At the end of the day, you chose to change. You walked away from that place. That's what matters.”

And with one last squeeze of his hand, she stepped away and returned to the kitchen, leaving him to wonder: did I.

Did he walk away, or did he run? The distinction suddenly seemed important, but he couldn't hang on to the edges of the question, couldn't make his memory and thoughts line up one way or another.

“I'm going to heat up some soup, and you're going to eat the whole pot,” she called over. “No arguing.”

Maybe Bobby would know, he thought.

Johnny vs Shiftless Time

He ate some soup and then he slept and when he woke again in the evening, he'd missed a call from Daniel.

What did he say, he asked his mom. Not much, she replied and that was hard to believe except she used a certain tone. He tried to focus on the long, empty day that lay behind him; why hadn't he touched Daniel more while he was here? What a waste of time. She watched him and said, do you remember when you had chickenpox? I had to stop you from scratching your chest and face bloody, and you told me you hated me. No I didn't, he said, because he'd *never*. Oh, you *did*, she said, but she smiled. Don't look so upset, it's normal. Sometimes that's what happens when a kid's in pain and confused. It doesn't mean they really feel that way, they just don't know how to process it. So it didn't bother you, he asked. I didn't say that, she said.

His room on the second day was grey and inert. He'd never bothered putting up posters or anything else like he had in his room in the main house, and this paid off now; to the half-lidded eye, the walls were a blank reflecting surface of his current self, and so he felt nothing of turning back into the stale sheets of his bed and trying to sleep more.

A new thought: what did his old room look like now? Were the posters still on the walls, or had Sid ordered the maids to go in and scrub his presence from the space?

It didn't matter, and yet, it did. What did it mean, that he could be erased so easily?

What's a person when who you are is what you do and what you do is nothing at all. He couldn't work out and he couldn't listen to music and he couldn't sit around any longer because his knees kept jumping, his heels lifting and tapping, lifting and tapping. He was so bored with himself and everything around him but he lacked the vision to see any path to change. He paced.

Bobby paced, and Johnny sat at the kitchen table.

“Shit,” he said. “This is bad.”

Yeah, said Johnny.

“This is really bad.” Bobby paused and looked over at him sharply. “Do you think they'll go after anyone else? Do we need to warn the others?”

Johnny hadn't thought of that. This was why it was good to have Bobby around. He was glad he called him. It was maybe the last good thing he did.

We need to strike first, he said.

“Bit fucking late for that, Johnny. You have a *concussion*.”

Okay, well. He shrugged and amended: then we need to strike back.

And he was really glad his mom wasn't home, she probably wouldn't be too happy about that. She thought the police could do something, but she hadn't seen that Silver guy's house. She hadn't seen his eyes.

“You can forget about doing anything until you're recovered.”

Obviously.

Bobby shook his head and rubbed his face. “All this for the fucking tournament,” he muttered.

It's not about the tournament, he said; it was never about the tournament.

He dropped his hand and watched Johnny back, jaw tight. After a long moment, he nodded. “Yeah, I know.”

You remember Coyote Creek?

Bobby said nothing, and his eyes slid away, but Johnny knew he remembered. It wasn't something you forgot.

If they're gonna try running us down, then the only thing we can do is show them who the real Cobra Kai is.

“We can't go back to that house,” Bobby said eventually, mind already turning to strategy because he was a Cobra through and through. He didn't look happy, but he wasn't good at saying no to Johnny. He was always going to follow him.

No, agreed Johnny.

“We should go where they train, hit them at home.”

You know where they probably train, right.

Again, Bobby said nothing. He knew. They both did.

He was awake this time when the phone rang. His head twinged dully as he raised the handset to his ear, but the discomfort was worth it for the sound of his voice, the warmth that spread through him the moment his brain made the connection and realized: Daniel was there.

“How're you feeling?” asked Daniel.

Bored, he said, and the tightness in his chest eased as he caught the slight huff of laughter on the other end of the line. If Daniel could laugh at him, he probably wasn't that upset.

“You're not supposed to get bored while you're hurt, Johnny.” Dimmed brightness in his voice, like he was trying to smile even though Johnny wasn't there to see it.

You ever been hurt before? he almost replied, but he cut the words out after the first syllable. Because of course Daniel has been hurt before. There followed an odd silence. Johnny didn't know how to fill it. His whole day had been like this.

“Did you try that tea I brought yesterday?”

What did you do today, asked Johnny at the same time. And then: yeah, it was disgusting.

“Well, keep drinking it anyway, it's good for you.”

How do you know, *you* ever drink it?

“Mr. Miyagi knows all about that kinda stuff, man. You doubting Mr. Miyagi?”

And he would never; Mr. Miyagi had beat Sensei without breaking a sweat, and Johnny had been taught to respect strength.

What did you do today? he asked again, and he shifted and grimaced and carefully reclined back so he was resting on his side. He balanced the phone on his face and shut his eyes so he didn't have to stare at the wall.

“Not much – we were at the shop, and then we trained for a while. I think Mr. Miyagi's trying to keep my mind busy or something.”

Tall order, murmured Johnny. He wished Daniel was there.

“I um,” said Daniel, strangely tentative, “I thought I might stop over there at lunch tomorrow. I mean, if you're feeling up to it.”

Lunch tomorrow felt like an eternity away, like it might never come. Time was weird just then, and he was kind of bothered that no one else seemed to feel the same way.

“Johnny?”

Yeah, he said belatedly. Yeah, sounds good.

On the third day he was ripped from sleep by Jim hissing, “*No, don't —*” and Dutch performing a diving double axe handle on the end of his mattress.

Jesus fuck, he yelped, and a second later his mom was in the doorway going, what the hell?

“Sorry, Mrs. Lawrence,” said Jim quickly, and Dutch reclined casually back on his elbows next to a wild-eyed Johnny and added, unrepentant:

“Yeah, sorry, Laura.” And he was using that tone he always used around Johnny's mom, because he was gross and thought Johnny's mom was hot, and it was always the worst thing in the world.

Johnny grimaced and shoved at him, and Dutch took the push without striking back, which meant Bobby must've filled them in on his injury. Dutch always struck back.

He needs to *rest*, said Laura.

“Yeah, that's why we're here,” said Dutch, reaching over to ruffle Johnny's hair before he could duck it. “To feed him peeled grapes and fan him with palm fronds and shit.”

“I actually have class in an hour,” Jim said to her, apologetic. “We can't stay long.”

She looked past him to the bed. Johnny?

Yeah?

How are you feeling?

Fine.

She went to go make him breakfast, and Dutch's idle smirk vanished like someone taking off a mask.

“We should burn the fucker's house down,” he said, voice low to prevent it being overheard from the other room.

And what did Bobby think of that plan?

“Bobby should get with the program and start planning how to cover our tracks, instead of just shooting down all my ideas. That guy's been such a wet fucking blanket since last December.”

Jim approached the bed and stood looking down at Johnny with worried eyes. Johnny glanced up at him and shook his head.

I'm fine, he said again. Again and again and again.

“You're sure it was the same guys?” asked Jim, but meanwhile his tone was asking, is this for real? Do we have to do this?

Yeah.

“'Course it was,” said Dutch. “I bet that asshole picked up the phone the moment we were out the door.”

“You seem almost happy about all this,” accused Jim.

Dutch spread his hands. “Happy? No. But yeah, maybe I'm relieved we're past the stupid Nancy Drew shit. If there's gonna be a fight, I want to face it head-on.” He looked at Johnny. “And it was always going to be a fight. Right, Johnny?”

And yeah. It was always going to be a fight.

Are you feeling any better? Be honest, she said. She tipped her head to put in an earring and multi-tasked by pinning him with a narrow, assessing look.

I mean, I don't know. I guess? he said, because he thought his head hurt less. Mostly he just felt nothing.

My meeting with Leonard should only take an hour or two. Do you want me to pick up anything from the store? What are you in the mood for?

He wished she'd stop asking him questions.

He couldn't work out and he couldn't listen to music and he couldn't lie around any longer because his skin felt shrink-wrapped over his body, everything too tight, tamped down. He had nothing to do. He wanted to do nothing. A minute passed like an hour passed like a dream, and he was somehow still there. He paced, and then Daniel was in the doorway, stepping into the house and looking around at him with a hesitant, alert expression, and Johnny didn't stop moving or check his stride even a little as he changed direction, crossed the room.

Oof, went Daniel, and he rocked half a step back as Johnny wrapped his arms tightly around him. Finally, something he could do. And Daniel was the perfect size for it, look at that.

“Did you bring the Avanti?” asked Johnny into his hair.

Daniel brought a hand up to press against his back. His reply, crushed against Johnny's chest, was somewhat muffled. “Guess that means you're on the mend.”

“Can we please get out of here?”

“Yeah, I think we can manage that," said Daniel, as his fingers tap-danced lightly up his spine.

Johnny vs Failed Seduction

“So I don't want to tarnish this beautiful reunion,” Daniel was saying, “but I need you to understand this is merely a – visitation kind of situation. Your mom said the doctor said you probably shouldn't drive yet, and anyway, I need to get back home somehow and I think a taxi across the valley would be pretty pricey – Johnny, you hear me?”

And he didn't sound like he was holding out much hope, but yeah, Johnny heard him, he just wasn't really listening.

It's been a while since he saw the Avanti parked out front. She used to belong in this driveway; he'd bang out of the main house and there she'd be, waiting for him. Red and fast and ready to take him away.

He smoothed a hand along the driver's side door and Daniel reached from behind to tug at his wrist.

“Hey, headcases belong in the passenger seat,” he said, and he'd sound really patronizing if he didn't always sound kinda patronizing; if he didn't also sound fond and kinda thick and weird about it.

Johnny flipped his hand, breaking Daniel's hold in exchange for gripping his wrist instead. He pulled and turned and then he was pressing Daniel up against his car, hip to hip and chest to chest and only a spare scrap of air between their faces. He was distantly relieved that the movement had been fluid and uninterrupted. The day before he'd still had trouble with coordination, like he was thirteen again and incapable of finding an end table that didn't have it in for his shins.

The metal creaked slightly as Daniel leaned back, half-sitting atop the Avanti. He tipped his head, eyes going narrow even as his face steadily heated, a pretty flush rising and sweeping down his cheeks. “This feels like a trap," he observed, like he wasn't going to turn into it, open for it.

“Don't know what you're talking about,” said Johnny, nosing along his temple. His hands slid down, questing.

Daniel's chest hitched: a quick, startled intake of breath that abruptly transformed into a laugh at the end.

And that wasn't right at all, he was supposed to be falling apart for him. Johnny's hands went still where they were squeezed into the

other boy's jeans, and he pulled away slightly to frown at him.

Daniel's mouth quirked and he lifted a hand to show the shining loop of keys dangling from his index and middle finger. “Looking for these?” he asked wryly.

Johnny was too slow in grabbing for them. Guess his coordination still wasn't all there. He bit his tongue and looked away across the drive, shaking his head. Maybe a little embarrassed.

Daniel squeezed his hip and patted his stomach and then, because there was no other direction to go, let himself fall backwards into the driver's seat. He shook the keys like a cat's toy and smiled up at him as he twisted and pretzeled his body, setting his feet down by the pedals. “So we getting out of here or you going to stage some kind of civil disobedience now and sit down right there on the concrete?”

The Avanti's shotgun was better than nothing, he figured. Probably. Johnny bit back a curse and rounded the car.

The passenger seat felt mostly the same as the driver's. He shifted over the leather and clicked the seatbelt home and then looked over to find Daniel watching him.

“What?” he said.

Daniel shook his head. “Nothing. Where, uh – you got anyplace in particular you wanna go?”

Johnny carefully set his head back against the seat, and his skull registered the pressure tenderly. “Not really. Just drive.”

“Okay,” he said quietly. “I can do that.”

In his glove box, he found a pair of sunglasses. He thought they might've originally been Daniel's, actually. He mentally shrugged and put them on, and that made it easier to look out the windshield instead of down at his lap.

“Sorry it isn't a nicer day,” said Daniel, flicking his fingers over the steering wheel at the sight before them on the 101: the heavy front of smog obscuring the distance.

“It's fine,” he said. It's not like he had to see the hills or city to know it was all there. He didn't know why Daniel kept apologizing for stuff that had nothing to do with him.

Johnny glanced over to Daniel chewing his mouth and frowning ahead at the road. He shook his head and slouched in his seat, put his elbow out the window and propped his face up on his wrist. He'd meant to say something else, but he didn't remember what. It probably didn't matter much, he figured.

He let the ozone-heavy wind of the road flow over him for a while.

He knew Daniel probably thought he hated him driving. And sure, he preferred to drive. Thinking while driving was easy and clarifying. Thinking while being driven more often than not ended in him turning circles around a mental drain. But still, he never really minded Daniel driving so much as he was bothered by how *much* he didn't mind it.

With the notable exception of that one time he almost killed them both, Daniel was pretty careful with the Avanti. He drove like a kid who was still practicing with his permit; he always checked all his mirrors twice before signaling to change lanes, and he kept his hands strictly at ten and two – his hands were never so still as they were when he was driving.

He felt safe when Daniel drove. And that was a pretty terrifying thought, so – yeah, Johnny preferred to drive.

“What do you think, 27?” asked Daniel as they passed a road sign. “Maybe drive around one of those million parks they have up there?”

“Lot of places to park in those hills,” said Johnny. And when Daniel looked over, bemused, he added, “You're not trying to take me

somewhere isolated to work me over, are you."

"Work you over," said Daniel, and they were definitely off their rhythm because it took him a few seconds to get Johnny's meaning. "You mean, am I gonna make you talk?"

Johnny shrugged. Kept watching him.

Daniel's mouth hooked up on the side, not entirely happy but not unhappy either. He shook his head straight and checked his mirrors again. "Wasn't gonna make you talk, Johnny. Give me some credit. Planned to wait until you had a clean bill of health before putting you through any big conversations."

That didn't sound good. He kind of wished he hadn't said anything, because now he knew there was a big conversation out there. He hated waiting for a blow.

"Is this because of the other day?" he asked. "Because that wasn't about you. My head was killing me and there's just. There's a lot going on."

"Seriously, don't worry about it," said Daniel, because of course he did; in his head, Johnny should probably never worry about anything, especially not Daniel himself. Worrying was for people who did things. Things like driving.

Daniel glanced over and must've read something in Johnny's face, because he grimaced.

"You know," said Daniel, almost to himself, "maybe I will find some place to park."

Johnny vs Soon Enough

They found a service road off of Topanga Canyon that wound up and through the grassy hills. The gravel was potted and worn, eroded down to an occasional large bare rock that the Avanti had to climb up and over. They were going slow enough that the engine was quiet, and every scrape of the undercarriage was audible; Daniel glanced at him twice before Johnny, sitting forward to observe the road, said:

“It's fine.”

Despite this deliberate show of non-concern, he found himself reaching over to adjust the wheel as they eased around a corner, and Daniel sighed and dropped his right hand to Johnny's thigh.

“How many guys does it take to steer a car, anyway,” he said, tone like he was pondering a deep philosophical question.

“Sometimes two,” said Johnny, turning the wheel to navigate them around a boulder. “Give her a little gas, will you. Hesitate too much and she could get stuck.”

Daniel obeyed and the Avanti roared in response. Johnny glanced over, eyebrow up, and he smiled slightly. “Too much?”

“Just be cool.”

Daniel squeezed his thigh lightly. “Oh, I could never be as cool as Johnny Lawrence. Why even try?”

He just shook his head.

They crested a small rise and were confronted with acres of more of the same, rippling grass stretching out over taller and taller hills. Somewhere in the distance would be a summit of sorts, and a glimpse of the ocean. There was space enough where they were to do a three-point turn to go back the way they came – knowing Daniel, it would be more like a five-point turn – so Johnny let go of the wheel and sat back.

“Let's park here,” he said, and moments later the Avanti quieted.

The wind blew over the park, a slight bite to it that hadn't been present in the valley. Johnny should've brought a jacket, but he's not great at planning ahead even when his brain was working properly.

Daniel, he noticed, had a jacket.

He took off the sunglasses, tossing them up on the dash. He rubbed the bridge of his nose and waited a beat while glancing out the car; at the overcast sky; anywhere but at him because he didn't know what to do with a Daniel who was hesitating.

“Would you get over here, already," he said at last.

Daniel immediately turned in his seat, rising up and getting his knees under him so he could clamber carefully over to the passenger side. Instead of straddling him like Johnny expected, he slung himself sidesaddle over his lap. His left arm squeezed around Johnny's waist between his back and the seat, and his head went to his shoulder: face turning in to his neck, eyes shutting.

I don't mind that you're bigger than me, Daniel said once, sometime. Johnny figured he mostly meant it in a sex way. Not – not like this. This meant something. He just wasn't sure what. He put an arm around Daniel as if he could drag him closer and thought of nothing but the rise and fall of his breathing against his chest, the weight of him slowly going boneless on his thighs.

“It always drove me crazy when my ma worried after me,” said Daniel without opening his eyes. He flattened his nose against Johnny's neck and sighed through it: a warm stream of air against his skin. “I'm sorry if I was too much for you the other day. I just – I just really need to know you're going to be okay.”

“I'm going to be okay,” said Johnny automatically.

Daniel's hair tickled the underside of his chin as he nodded. “I know you will be.”

Soon enough, Johnny figured, this would be true. Soon, it would all be over.

Johnny vs A Sure Thing

He probably could have sat there forever, mind like the still, unbroken surface of a lake as he held Daniel. If he wasn't moving, and Daniel wasn't moving, then it didn't feel so wrong that his thoughts weren't either. It was almost like sleeping, except he didn't have to dream. It was a perfect state of being.

Except then Daniel moved.

He sat up, twisting at the waist so he was mostly facing Johnny, and his eyes moved over his face and chest. Cataloging, maybe. His expression was hard to interpret. Then he ducked his head slightly, almost shy, and pressed a soft, careful kiss to his mouth. Johnny folded his bottom lip between his own and tried to kiss back.

For the next couple minutes, every motion and touch felt oddly distinct. Separate. A sum with all parts accounted for – except no, there had to be a screw or something missing, because it kept coming out not-quite-right. Johnny waited for the feeling to come back: the relieving clarity he always felt in these moments with Daniel, when he knew exactly how to move and could do no wrong. Kissing Daniel had come natural to him like almost nothing else ever had, not even karate. He was meant to do it.

But the feeling wouldn't come. Daniel licked inside his mouth and Johnny was a beat late in reacting; Daniel shifted on his lap and Johnny's hand landed wrong in trying to grab his hip, found the soft flesh of his waist where he'd been expected the firm hold of bone.

Daniel noticed, of course. He broke the kiss and cleared his throat. “Not in the mood, huh.”

He felt his face heat. “I want to be,” he muttered, looking past Daniel to the grassy hills. “It's just – it's like there's too much going on, or not enough, or—”

“It's okay,” he said quickly. He pressed a brief, closemouthed kiss to his mouth, as if to punctuate the sentiment or maybe just give Johnny permission to stop explaining. Then he sat back and shifted around so he was straddling his legs. But he didn't do anything in the new position except sit and study Johnny.

“It's not okay,” said Johnny, when he got sick of watching the wind

stir the grass. And then, because Daniel was still sitting there, waiting and watching, the worry finally pushed up and out into the world: “It's stupid. Like, what if it doesn't come back? What if I'm just like this now, just – slow and. And empty.”

Daniel leaned forward and twined his hands behind his neck, so Johnny could feel their fidgeting tangle at his nape. “It hasn't even been a week, Johnny. You gotta be patient.” And when Johnny shook his head slightly, pressing his lips tight, he added, “Didn't the doctor say *no strenuous exercise*?”

He didn't know how to explain how unsettling it all was, the broken connection with his own body. “Kissing you is supposed to be the easiest thing in the world.”

Daniel looked a little pleased, because he always missed the point. “Well, sure. And you're a natural at it, so I wouldn't worry about being able to lose the ability, or whatever. It's like—”

“Don't say riding a bike.”

“—driving a car, I was gonna say.”

“Yeah, and I can't do that either,” he pointed out, annoyed.

Daniel heaved a mighty sigh and tipped forward until their foreheads and noses were pressed together, like he could transmit comfort by physically forcing it through the skin of Johnny's head.

“What I meant was, you always do all that with everything you got,” he said. “Doc said no strenuous activity, but with Johnny Lawrence everything is a strenuous activity. I mean, boy, what an athlete, right?” he said on a breathy laugh. “No stopping that guy.”

“Apparently there is,” he said darkly, and he swore he could feel the flick of Daniel's lashes against his face as the other boy rolled his eyes.

“When you're better in a week or two, I'm going to say *I told you so* until I'm blue in the face.” Daniel paused. “Well, no, I probably won't, because we'll be too busy making out. But I'm definitely going to say it at least once. Count on it.”

Johnny thought about this quasi-mythical day in the future where he will be able to kiss Daniel quiet. He thought about the times he's done it in the past and wanted to curse himself out for not appreciating it more. Did that guy know what he had? It felt impossible that he

could've cherished it enough.

Daniel pressed a kiss to his cheek, and another to his temple, and another to his nose, and probably would've gone on like that for a while if Johnny didn't make a face and twist his head away. Trying not to smile, because seriously, he wasn't in the mood for smiling.

“Look, you're not even missing anything, okay? I'm gonna make sure of it. Think of it like – kisses on layaway,” said Daniel, and his tone went revelatory, like he'd reached the end of his sentence and found he struck gold.

“What's layaway?” asked Johnny.

He rocked back on Johnny's lap so he could look at him, nose wrinkled but eyes were warm and fond. “Ugh, you're such a rich kid sometimes. Anyway, look – I'll be keeping a ledger in my head, okay. Every time we would've kissed will get a tally mark, and we'll save them all up for when you're better and then cash in all at once. It'll be great.”

Johnny reached for his hip, and this time he got it on the first try. “Sounds like gambling.”

“Nah, gambling implies you could lose,” said Daniel, twisting a little on his lap, pressing against his hand just to feel the hold. He smiled, crooked white teeth peeking out. “And you know me, I'm a sure thing.”

Johnny vs Group Projects

“Okay, we need a plan,” said Bobby. “I don't want us showing up there and thinking we can just run at them, fists flying.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” said Dutch, philosophical from one of the lounge chairs. He was tossing an orange high in the air, and not looking as he caught it. Johnny could've done that, once. Before.

Bobby ignored him and slowly paced in front of the glass sliding doors of the pool house. “We need to know when they're there, how many of them there are – how many you know of again, Johnny? Excluding Silver?”

Johnny looked away from Dutch. “Three.”

“So five on four, and we have to assume Silver is pretty formidable, if he was an old buddy of Sensei's.” Bobby stopped and chewed his cheek. “I'm not thrilled about those numbers, to be honest.”

“Oh, please. We can handle that easy, if Johnny's in the game,” said Tommy, leaning against the wall in the corner; where he would've once sounded smug with it, he now only sounded measured: trying for indifference.

“And I will be,” said Johnny, because no way was he sitting this out. “Look, Bobby, Mike Barnes can fight, but the other two – I don't know. I mean, they're nothing like us,” because no one in the valley was, “and I don't think we have to worry about them.”

“I still think someone should go check it out. Dutch,” said Bobby.

He caught his orange and looked over. “What?”

“No, I'm saying – you should do it.”

His face twisted. “Why me?”

“Because you're not in school and you don't have a job,” he said, emphatic. “You have no responsibilities.”

“It's not my fault you decided you didn't want to enjoy life, Bobby. You've got a trust fund too, nothing's stopping you, man.”

Johnny wasn't going to sit here and listen to this. “I'll go with him,” he

said. And when they all looked over, he shrugged. “I don't have a job or school either.”

“Yeah, but Johnny,” started Jim: sounding, for some reason, almost guilty.

“No, I don't like that,” said Bobby immediately.

“Why not?” demanded Johnny, spreading his hands. “It's just sitting in a car, watching the place.”

Bobby squared off, looking between Dutch and Johnny bullishly. “Yeah, and I can see how it'll go already. You'll see the guy who hit you with the bat go inside the dojo, and you turn to Dutch and say, that's the guy that hit me with the bat. And Dutch'll go, fuck waiting, let's get him now. And *you'll* say—”

“'Let's wait for the others, because I'm a pussy now',” said Dutch, in a high-pitched voice.

Bobby pointed at him but stared hard at Johnny. “See?”

“Oh, *what* – hey, that's him, not me!”

“If you really feel we need supervision,” said Dutch, bored, “why don't *you* do it, Bobby?”

“I can't, my mom's whole family is in town, I'm stuck on babysitting duty all weekend—”

“Eh, fuck it.” He shrugged and gestured expansively. “Bring the kids. Fun for the whole family.”

“*No*.”

And this was how Johnny was made to realize the next day was Thanksgiving. He cursed and groaned loudly and covered his face, and the others all shut up.

“Johnny?” said Jim, tentative. “You okay? Is it your head?”

“Any of you going to be at the club dinner tomorrow?” he asked, dropping his hands. They all shook their heads, bemused. “*Fuck*.”

Daniel vs A Goodbye

“That's coming along great,” came the bright voice from the ground, and Daniel glanced down to where Jessica was standing at the foot of the ladder. She shielded her eyes with her hand and smiled up at him.

“Hey, hang on a sec,” he called, and he carefully knocked his brush over the paint can sitting on the ledge of the roof before setting it aside. He made a quick descent, the ladder rattling against the side of the building with every step.

“It's looking really good,” said Jessica as he landed beside her on the ground. “You did an amazing job with the circle, did you freehand that?”

Daniel looked back up to the half-finished shop sign, and the perfect sun he was in the middle of painting a tree over. “Nah, that was all Mr. Miyagi. Man should've been a math teacher in another life, I don't know. He'll probably do the lettering too, but he's letting me do the tree. Said he wanted it to have part of both of us.”

“That's really sweet of him,” she said, and she tucked her hair behind her ear and looked at the ground. “You're all very sweet. I've never known guys like you.”

Daniel turned to her, but something about her expression had his smile fading before it could reach its apex. He watched her watch the ground, and he suddenly remembered: she'd heard everything in the hospital. Or, at least, enough.

“Look, Jessica,” he began, “about – about me and Johnny, what you heard the other night. I just – I hope you're not—”

“What? No,” she said quickly. She went pink but seemed earnest enough as she shook her head. “No, I already um, kinda knew about that. Don't worry.”

“Oh,” he said, not knowing what to think.

“Yeah. I mean, no offense,” she added with an awkward laugh, “but you guys are kind of. Really bad? At hiding it, I mean. If that's what you were trying to do.”

“Oh,” he said again. He shifted his weight and put a hand on the

ladder. “I guess, we weren't... *not* trying to hide it.”

She nodded and then straightened her shoulders. Flapped her hands at her side once and said, “So, you know how I said I was going to go back to Ohio? Well – tomorrow being Thanksgiving and all....”

“Oh,” he said, for the third time, and he used to be a better conversationalist, he was pretty sure. Maybe Johnny's way with words was contagious. “Right, that's – of course. Well, damn,” he said abruptly, heart sinking. “I'm gonna miss having you as a neighbor.”

She dimpled. “Should've opened your shop during the summer....”

“Yeah, kind of had a lot going on then,” he said, casting his mind back briefly. He focused on her and threw open his arms. “Well, alright, c'mere.”

She hugged him, tucking her chin over his shoulder and saying, “It was really great meeting you, Daniel.”

“You better send me a postcard or something from Ohio. And if you're ever out this way again, you know, when you get sick of the lack of rock climbing – make sure to stop in.”

She drew back, studying him. “People say that kind of thing a lot, but I think you actually mean it.”

“I do,” he said, because in his experience friends tended to be a short-lived thing, but not for lack of trying on his part.

“Well then, I wouldn't dream of doing otherwise.” She stepped back, took two steps towards the curb, and then paused. “Hey, Daniel, could you please tell Johnny—”

He waited, curious.

She thought about it and finished, “Tell him he was a really good teacher? And that I'm sorry about what happened, and I hope he'll be okay?”

“He's going to be okay,” said Daniel. “But I'll tell him.”

She smiled at him one more time, and then she was gone.

Daniel vs Planning

“Well, Jessica's leaving,” announced Daniel, letting himself into the shop.

He dumped the paint can down by the door and made a face as it spattered droplets on the floor. He knelt down and scraped at the spill with his fingers. It smeared, found the grain and made itself at home. He sighed and stood.

“Yeah, guess she's going back to Ohio,” he continued. “Don't know why she'd want to – I've been to Ohio. It's nothing special. I mean, I know she's probably got family or whatever, and I guess some kind of crappy boyfriend, but c'mon, this is California!” He walked over to the sink to wash the paint off his hands. “It's supposed to be a one-way ticket. You come west, you stay here. Who wants to go back to *Ohio*?”

“Miyagi seem to remember a boy last year, new to Valley,” said Mr. Miyagi across the room. “Very unhappy with California. Worst place on whole planet, boy say.”

Daniel rolled his eyes and roughly dried his hands with the towel by the sink before turning to him. “That's different, that was before I met you. How it works is, you meet some great people and you decide, hey, maybe this place ain't so bad after all.”

He perched on a tall stool next to the table where the man was trimming a new tree, and propped his chin on his fist. “You say goodbye to her?” he asked belatedly.

“Jessica stop in before talking to Daniel-san.”

“Good, that's good.” He kicked his feet across the rungs of the stool. “Sucks that she didn't get a chance to say goodbye to Johnny, though. Since he was like, teaching her karate or whatever.”

Miyagi paused and looked over the rim of his glasses at Daniel.

He shrugged. “Yeah, I don't know either. Apparently that was happening.”

“Very interesting,” said Mr. Miyagi, returning to his tree.

Was it? thought Daniel. It was weird, was what it was. He kept trying to picture Johnny teaching anyone anything, and it didn't quite

connect. Which opened up the possibility that Daniel was like, underestimating his boyfriend or something. And underestimating someone was the first step to losing to them, and Daniel didn't like the idea of losing at being a boyfriend.

Maybe he should ask Johnny to teach him something, he thought. Then he could be all appreciative, really ladle on the compliments. What was Johnny good at, besides sex and karate and brooding?

He could show Daniel how to do an oil change. Daniel already *knew* how to change the oil in a car, but he could play dumb, if it meant Johnny got to feel like he was good at something. Hell, maybe Johnny knew a special way of doing it; the one time he'd changed the Avanti's oil on their trip, Daniel had been a little distracted and hadn't paid much attention.

(Johnny's hands looked good streaked in dirty oil: his fingers all strong and competent, and boy, had that promise earned out.)

Who was he kidding, this plan probably wouldn't work; Johnny would get all suspicious, probably assume Daniel just wanted to be bent over the open hood of a car. Which, like – he wouldn't say *no* to that, but yeah, he probably should think of a different thing to be taught. Something where his motives were perfectly unimpeachable, or at least better hidden.

“How is Lawrence-san?” asked Mr. Miyagi.

Daniel blinked. “Oh, uh. He's okay. I don't think he's really in pain anymore, but he's still feeling a little – off, I guess. I don't know, he had trouble explaining it.”

“Drinking tea?”

“He said it was gross,” said Daniel, only half-apologetic because he'd tasted some of the tea out of curiosity, and yeah, it was pretty damn gross.

“Tell boy – drink more tea,” said Mr. Miyagi.

“Yeah, yeah.” He shifted on the stool and glanced at the clock and sighed. “I better get to the store, otherwise our dinner tomorrow's gonna consist of nothing but fish.”

“Nothing wrong with Miyagi's fish.”

Daniel hopped off the stool and backed away, spreading his arms. “Did I say there was?”

“Daniel-san.”

He paused by the door. “Yeah?”

“Lawrence family coming tomorrow?”

His fingers tapped the doorframe. “Yeah, I think – his mom said they'd try to stop by.” He was trying not to feel anxious about it, about his ma meeting Mrs. Lawrence. A pair of friendly ladies, what could go wrong?

“Full house,” commented Miyagi.

“You regretting offering to host?”

“Miyagi offered?” he said dryly, but he was smiling, so Daniel just flapped a hand and left for the store.

Daniel vs Last Minute Shoppers

Daniel liked grocery shopping, always had. There was something to be said for going in some place with empty hands and coming out loaded down with the makings for some good grub. And yeah, once he was old enough to do the shopping alone and was suddenly the one parting with the cash at the till, a little of that magical shine came off the whole endeavor, but all the same, it was money going someplace good, namely: people's bellies.

Mr. Miyagi had a few dozen small habits and hobbies he liked to do around the house: tending the garden and tinkering with his fishing gear, and of course trimming the bonsai, and after a year of watching him, Daniel kind of worked out the appeal of it. It was the same satisfaction Johnny got from hand-washing the Avanti – the care of something beautiful, maintenance of the objects that fill up one's life. Daniel didn't own many things, but he did have a few people. Grocery shopping could be a kind of maintenance, he thought.

Plus, he was good at it.

“Oh, aren't you a sweet thing,” said the old lady who was in no way fooling him. Her hand was still outstretched towards the bags of potatoes, and her smile was very, very fake. “Helping your mother out with the holiday shopping?”

There was a tone people used sometimes that told him they thought he was really young. He wasn't above using it to his advantage, in the right circumstances.

He settled the bag he'd grabbed firmly into the corner of his shopping cart and smiled at her. “She told me to get the best I could find!”

She cast her eye over the remaining couple bags on the display, the ones that were a little wrinkled and showing some eyes. Her gaze returned to him, not yet ready to admit defeat.

“Are you sure she didn't want the reds?” she inquired, indicating the potatoes in question. “They're so festive, look very pretty on the table.”

This woman would consign him to a long weekend of soggy hashbrowns, and she wouldn't think twice of it. Ruthless. He stood his ground and said pleasantly, “She definitely said russets. But thanks.”

And he was about to move on – you had to be a quick operator in this kind of place, people were grabbing everything in sight – but at the last second his better nature descended, and he said consolingly as he passed, “You know, reds are still good for roasting, if you're not into the mashing game.”

The woman didn't look particularly thankful for the tip, just looked at him with a suddenly narrow gaze, but hey! He tried.

He finished the rest of his list, getting almost everything he needed – had a small crisis over the butter section, wondering if he should try to welcome the Lawrences by substituting in some godforsaken margarine, before his mother's face floated past his mind's eye and he recovered in the nick of time. Some compromise in a relationship was always necessary, but there were lines. And anyway, somehow he doubted Johnny actually cared.

Victorious: the whole shopping mart vanquished and eating his dust, Daniel pushed his haul across the parking lot. His mind was full of the rattle and bounce of the wire cart, and the next items on his to-do list (put away groceries; clean his room and make it fit for his mom to use; call Johnny), and so it took a few seconds to hear his name being called.

He raised his head and looked around, and after a moment he smiled in recognition, because Terry was standing a few feet away.

Daniel vs Covering His Bases

“I'm glad I ran into you,” said Terry. “Long time, no see.”

“Oh god,” said Daniel in realization, and he even took a half step back, appalled. “I'm so sorry – I was a complete no-show at the dojo, huh.”

Terry gave a small shrug and leaned back against his mutant truck, putting his hands in the pockets of a jean jacket. He kept smiling. “Was only a little worried you'd fallen off a cliff, or had another run-in with some bad characters.”

“Yeah, I – I meant to call you,” he said, and it was only kind of a lie, because he absolutely would've wanted to call, if he'd remembered the man existed. But between Johnny, the shop, and his renewed training with Mr. Miyagi, he'd forgotten all about the offer to go down to the old Cobra Kai dojo.

He quickly filled Terry in on what had happened to Johnny; or at least, he tried to be quick about it, but every detail seemed pretty important. Somewhere during the story, Terry stopped nodding along. And then a little further along, he stopped blinking. Normally Daniel would take the hint and wrap things up, but the man's eyes were still definitely sharp and attentive as he listened. Besides, it felt good to tell the whole sorry tale to someone. He couldn't exactly share certain things with Mr. Miyagi, certain things like:

“—and now Johnny, he's in some kind of funk or something, he's not in the mood to do anything, even like,” and he felt himself blush a little, “well, you know. Anything.”

Terry looked away at that, brow pinched hard. He pushed off the truck and turned in a half-circle, nodding slowly to himself.

Daniel watched him and thought, what an empathetic guy. And then he thought, I gotta get going, I have dairy and meat in the cart and California doesn't have refrigerated weather.

“So, anyway,” he said, nudging his cart forward a couple inches with a fractious clatter, “we should have lunch sometime, but I gotta—”

“You need to come train with me,” said Terry, turning back to him. Daniel stopped, surprised, but before he could react, he continued,

“What you just said, all of it – Daniel, that sounds like very bad news.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, because he'd just said.

“Your boyfriend, there's not much you can do for him at the moment.” And Terry didn't seem to notice Daniel's reaction to that, which was: watch me, pal. “He'll heal when he heals, but in the mean time, you have the fight of your life coming up.”

Daniel shifted his weight, leaning on the shopping cart. “Well, I know, but like I said, Mr. Miyagi's—”

“You need to cover all your bases,” he urged. “That defense stuff is good, but you shouldn't restrict yourself to the same playbook as last year.”

“I mean, it hasn't failed me yet,” said Daniel, but then he was thinking about when he met that Mike guy, how helpless he'd felt the split-second before the punch connected with his face. It was the same helpless he'd always felt, like he'd never learned anything at all.

Terry stepped forward until he was killing both their necks to maintain eye contact. “For all you know, your enemies have studied last year's tournament. They'll be expecting everything you got.”

That's a thing? Daniel wanted to ask, but the guy's intense gaze made it kind of hard to commit to the words. He wanted to look away, or back up, or something, but he didn't want to be rude. He wavered, caught between the conflicting impulses. He really hadn't been expecting this conversation today.

Maybe Terry was right, he thought. Maybe he somehow still wasn't taking this seriously enough.

“You don't really think you'll be able to pull off that crane kick again, do you?” asked Terry, low and intent, and it's not that Daniel had thought he could, it's more that he'd tried not to think about it at all. “It's old news. Predators adapt – you need new moves.”

“What do you have in mind?” he asked, and a smile broke across Terry's face. He had a very wide mouth, Daniel noticed.

“Nothing I can't teach you in a couple afternoons,” promised Terry. “Combined with your sensei's defensive training, you'll be unstoppable.”

Daniel finally looked away, down past the man's broad denim-clad shoulder to the parking lot lights winking on around them. It got dark so early this time of year.

He thought about what it might mean, to finish the tournament and not have to go to the hospital afterwards; to win a fight and for once get to enjoy the victory unaccompanied by the ache of bruises or damaged joints; to show up at Johnny's door and spread his arms wide and go, see, you never have to worry about me again. It's over and we can be whoever we want.

“Unstoppable, huh,” said Daniel.

Daniel vs Almost Normal

“If it's that bad, why are you guys even going?” asked Daniel. He was stretched out on his back, arm behind his head, and staring at the ceiling as Johnny's quiet voice found its way across the valley and into his ear.

“I don't know,” he said. “I think she wants to like, win at the club or something.”

Daniel obviously had no idea what it was like to belong to an exclusive club, but he never imagined it might involve any anxiety. He'd always thought, once you were in, that was it? Done deal. You made it. Any alternative sounded kind of exhausting. Why would they call it a rat race if there's no finish line?

“It's stupid,” said Johnny. “Nobody there even likes Sid.”

“Then what's the problem? Your mom's great, how is this a competition.”

“She says they might like divorced single moms who didn't finish high school even less.”

“Oh.” He thought of Ali's mom, who occasionally still wore a sorority pin on her lapel, and winced at the ceiling. He shuffled his head in the cradle of his arm and switched tones. “Well, what do they know? There's plenty of education to be had out of school.”

“That's what I said.”

“What'd she say to that?”

“That's what someone who didn't go to college would say.”

“Ouch,” commented Daniel.

“Whatever, I think she's just really stressed about everything.”

“Well, that's why it's great that you guys are coming by afterwards, right? Get a little relaxation in, some stress-free socializing.”

Johnny paused and then said, a little flatly, “You realize your whole act doesn't fool me anymore, right?”

“What are you talking about?”

“After Fresno? I see right through you, man. Stress-free socializing,” he repeated in disgust. “I bet you're over there overthinking everything.”

“I am not,” he said, affronted.

“Whatever.”

“Hey, you maybe want to teach me how to change the oil on the Ford?” he asked abruptly, wanting to change the topic to literally anything else.

“What?” said Johnny, but not like he hadn't heard. Maybe his brain still wasn't processing things properly, thought Daniel.

“Oil change,” he said with very careful enunciation. “I just thought, you know, I should probably know a little more about how to take care of a nice car....” And maybe it hurt his pride a little to pretend he didn't know how to do something so basic, but sometimes big sacrifices had to be made.

“You expect me to believe you don't know how to do an oil change?” asked Johnny, and that wasn't promising, not at all. “I might have a concussion, but I'm pretty sure I remember someone not shutting up while I changed the Avanti's oil in Detroit.”

Daniel pushed his mouth to the side, narrowed his eyes at the ceiling and thought hard.

“You just want me to bend you over the hood,” continued Johnny.

“Hey, that's *not* what I was aiming for,” he protested, and then he hesitated, because he wasn't a chump. “I mean, obviously if you were so inclined, I'm not gonna say *no*—”

“We're not fucking over the open hood of a car, you might jostle something in the engine compartment.”

“We could close the hood,” he argued.

“The trunk's a better height for it anyway,” said Johnny, and it was really impossible to tell with him sometimes, what he did on purpose. This was Daniel's burden to carry: having a boyfriend who was so hot, he could get him going by accident. And hey, just because Johnny

wasn't really ready to do anything when they were together didn't mean, just maybe...

“It sounds like you've given this a lot of thought.” Daniel glanced around the room, but Mr. Miyagi was still safely outside. He dropped his hand to the front of his jeans and fiddled with the zipper of his fly. “Have any uh, other insights you wanna share?”

“Nope,” he said, and even though Daniel knew he was being teased, but it was impossible not to smile up into the air, at his mental image of him, because just then Johnny sounded almost normal.

Johnny vs The Club Dinner

Johnny was over all of it by the end of the first course: the collar and tie, the passing trickle of older women who told him they'd missed his handsome face around the club, the music (god, the music, it was like someone ringing a gong next to his head), the fake-easy smile his mom flashed to people she didn't actually like. It had been almost a full year since he was last here, and he hadn't missed it even a little bit.

“When you're older, you'll understand that at the end of the day, it's connections that matter,” Laura told him. She sipped her wine and caught the eye of someone over his head; smiled and nodded a greeting. “More than money, even.”

“Matter for what?” he asked. He wanted to tip his chin and pull at the tie constricting his throat. He stabbed his fork into his salad instead.

“For anything,” she said. “For everything, you name it. When you don't have family, Johnny, it's important to have friends. People you can rely on.”

“I have friends,” he said, but she was distracted by Mrs. Brownlow beckoning from three tables over; she excused herself, ignoring his whispered entreaties, and disappeared, and that's when the real wolves started circling. He saw a couple women get that light in their eye.

Johnny looked around and checked the time on the massive clock on the far wall. they had another hour and a half at least before they could leave. It was just as well that Daniel cooked such late dinners; the other boy had made it sound like he was doing it for their convenience, but Johnny was pretty sure Italians were just happy the closer they ate towards midnight.

Someone came up and dragged the chair to his right out from the table. They sat, and something about the precise timing of it – the whisper of the tablecloth being swiped aside; the creak of the chair and the way his folded hands landed with a thump of thick wrists on top of the table – Johnny knew before he turned and looked. He knew before a single word was said.

“What do you want,” he said, eyes going down to his plate, and the picked-over greens there.

“It's a day for thanks, isn't it,” said Sid. “Thought you might have something to say to me.”

His eyes slid over and his body followed, not quite squaring off because he'd promised his mom if they bumped into each other, he wouldn't start a fight.

“I don't have anything to say to you,” said Johnny, and he thought his voice felt normal enough in his chest, but under the weight of the man's presence, it came out sounding pathetic. Weak. Like he was already begging the man to just leave him alone.

Sid smiled like he'd said something funny. His cold eyes inspected Johnny, and just like always, they didn't seem to find much there. “No?”

Johnny said nothing.

“What do you think your mother's friends would all say to her, if they knew the shameful truth about her son?” Sid waved a large hand, in one easy sweep dismissing the glittering room. “I could end this pathetic little attempt at saving face with a few choice words, anytime I want.”

He'd do it, too. They both knew it. Sid thought nothing of making a scene, of shocking people or letting a room curdle in the awkward aftermath of words anyone else in the world would leave unspoken.

The spaces were growing again between Johnny's thoughts, and he fought to bridge the distance but he couldn't really feel his body. Like running in a dream, it was impossible to say he got anywhere. All around them, people swam in his vision and no matter the expression on any given face – cheer, boredom, attentiveness, irritation – he knew what they'd all turn into the moment Sid let the truth slip loose. They'd look at him how he'd looked at himself in the mirror for so many years, how Tommy had looked on the beach.

How Sid had always looked at him.

With blind desperation, he returned to what he knew. There had always been two undeniable facts about Sid: he hated Johnny, and he loved Laura.

“Yeah,” he said after what might've been a long pause, “yeah, good luck with that. You'll really win her back that way.”

Because why else reject every attempt at mediation and try to play brinkmanship with a trial, unless he was hoping she'd blink? Not even Sid loved arguing that much.

His eyes went narrow. “Heard you've been brawling again,” he said. Switching tactics.

Again, Johnny said nothing. In his lap, his hands balled into fists.

Sid reached across the table and picked up a crouton from his plate. He examined it for a moment like a jeweler inspecting a diamond and then popped it into his mouth. “Do you know how much you would've cost your mother if it wasn't for me?” he inquired around a loud crunch. “*My* checkbook, *my* insurance? Your very existence – it's an expensive proposition.”

“You should leave before my mom gets back,” he said to the table. He only meant he didn't want her getting upset, but he immediately realized it sounded like—

“Hiding behind her skirts again? I thought you grew out of that once you became the big karate champion.” He sat back in his seat and shrugged. “But I guess you're not a champion anymore, are you. Back to being the kicked puppy. The layabout.”

“Johnny, hi!”

His head jerked up.

Ali Mills beamed from a few feet away. Her face was flushed attractively, her hair done up in a halo of irrepressible ash blonde curls, and she was smiling right at him, no mistaking it. He gaped dumbly.

The smile didn't alter in the slightest as she swung it towards Sid. “Hi, Mr. Weinberg. Do you mind if I talk to Johnny for a bit? We haven't seen each other in *ages* and have a lot of catching up to do.”

Sid opened his mouth, eyes flickering back to Johnny, who didn't breathe. Finally, he stood and buttoned his suit jacket. He popped a knuckle. Johnny automatically blinked hard at the sound.

“See you around, kid,” he said.

Johnny didn't watch him leave.

Ali & Reading Between the Lines

There were few events more tedious than the annual club dinner at Thanksgiving. Ali hadn't had a real break from studying in months, and the last thing she'd wanted to do that afternoon was go play the trophy daughter for her parent's friends.

Plus, there were certain people she suspected might be there. People like Johnny Lawrence.

From across the room, he looked more or less the same, except he badly needed a haircut. Maybe he was a little broader in the shoulders – his jacket didn't look like it fit quite right. He seemed unhappy, though, and that was as it had been for the past couple years.

She wasn't sure what made her finally approach his table. Something about the way he was staring down at it like he could make the room disappear if he pretended hard enough. Or maybe it was the deepening red of his face and the confident, commanding way his stepdad kept talking at it.

She wondered if Johnny was still living at home. He'd always struggled with the concept of quitting a situation; case in point: he didn't seem to realize he could get up and walk away from the table. Stay and suffer or lash out, those were his two modes for dealing with conflict. What a way to live. He was going to snap some day and run off to Mars or like, Florida. He probably wouldn't even pause long enough to pack a bag.

Once Mr. Weinberg had gone, she looked at him and said, because this is what you say, “Been a while.”

Their last semester of high school, Johnny had disappeared into the background of her life as much as person could while still physically taking up space in a room. Once he started leaving Daniel alone, she hadn't had a reason to think about him; for that matter, once he left Daniel alone, Johnny apparently hadn't a reason to talk to her either.

“Yeah,” said Johnny.

Her hand traced the frame of the nearest chair. “Guess you and your stepdad are still getting along famously, huh.”

“Ex-stepdad,” he said. His eyes went from the table to her face to past

her, but he didn't look like he was seeing any of it. “My mom's divorcing him.”

“Oh,” she said, surprised. “Good for her.”

And good for Ali, who hadn't realized she'd disconnected herself from the club gossip circuit so successfully. What a strange thing to trip over: this random piece of evidence that she really was moving on from this tiny world.

They looked at each other. Johnny's expression was odd; he was squinting a little, but not like he was confused.

“This is really weird,” he said finally, and she laughed a little. His mouth slid into a slight smirk and he nodded like he'd scored a point. His shoulders relaxed and he sat back in his chair, and for a moment he looked every inch the comfortable easy-going guy she used to know, her one ally at these terrible events.

“So – how's college? I was on a campus a while back, and everyone looked like a nerd. But like, hot nerds,” he added, conscientious.

Johnny used to think someone was a nerd if they carried more than one pencil on their person.

“There are *a lot* of hot nerds at my school,” she told him very seriously.

“That's good,” he said, nodding. “Happy for you.”

They both seemed to realize he sounded like he meant it at the same time, and all they could do was look at each other again.

“How about you, what's Johnny Lawrence doing with himself these days?” she said briskly.

“Uh,” he said, and he rubbed the back of his neck. “I'm...” and then he looked like he changed his mind before saying, “sort of trying to figure that one out.”

“Right, well, you might want to figure out a good lie at least,” she said. “Because you know these people are going to ask you a few dozen times.”

“Good point.” His expression went thoughtful. “What do you think would sound good?”

She gave up and dragged a chair out, slid into it. She clasped her hands over the table in a businesslike manner and said, “Depends. Do you want to impress them, or *shock* them?”

“Don't think my mom would care for a scandal right now,” he said, expression holding a strange ruefulness, like there was a joke there.

“So you're still a momma's boy,” she said, tentatively reaching for the old tease.

To her relief, his mouth immediately hooked up at the corner, and he looked away, shaking his head and saying, “Yeah, yeah.”

Something in the back of her head distantly twinged, but she put it down to the strangeness of the whole encounter.

Johnny vs Supervising

“That wasn't so bad, was it?” Laura said a couple hours later as they drove across the valley towards the sinking sun.

It was over, so there was no point in answering that with any attempt at honesty. Johnny pulled off his tie and threw it over his shoulder before collapsing back against his seat. He turned his head in a lazy roll and asked, “Do you think I could drive the Avanti home tonight?”

“That depends,” she said.

“On what?”

“Well, two things – first, in your expert opinion, do you think the Avanti will be safe in your hands?”

He looked ahead at the moving road and thought about it and said yes, and she accepted this answer because she knew he wouldn't risk the car on a lie.

“What's the second thing?” he asked, when it looked like she'd forgotten it.

She started slightly and then laughed out the windshield. “Whether you can convince Daniel to hand over the keys.” He started to make a protesting noise and she shook her head. “You're on your own there, kid.”

“You nervous at all?” he asked her as they pulled up on outside the gate to Mr. Miyagi's place.

Laura checked her reflection in her visor mirror and then slapped it back up after only a second. “Nervous? No, of course not. I'm great at meeting new people.”

And that's how he knew she was kind of nervous.

It was really awkward at first. Johnny kind of wished he didn't have to be there for it. Maybe if he disappeared and came back while the introductions were all done, and the small talk had turned into something a little less stilted? And he tried doing just that – tried

following the bright sound of Daniel's voice calling hello from the kitchen – but Laura reached out and snagged his elbow and tugged him swinging against her side like he was a little kid trying to wander off in a department store. She smiled the whole time, but her grip was like a mechanical claw that could probably lift the biggest prize in the Golf N Stuff arcade machine.

“Johnny,” said Lucille as they slowly inched in from the door, “how's your head?”

“It's fine,” he said, for probably the billionth time that week.

“Your home is amazing,” Laura said to Mr. Miyagi as he took their coats. “Thank you so much for having us over.”

“Welcome,” he said, and he indicated they should sit over at the table.

Johnny knelt down and watched his mom lower herself awkwardly to the floor, leaving her legs bent out at the side. She tugged and smoothed the drape of her skirt, and her face was a little pink but her smile didn't waver as she looked over at Lucille.

This was Daniel's fault, he decided. That kid just couldn't help himself, he had to try and win at Thanksgiving. Be the big man and bring everyone together and cook them a meal. The nerve on that twerp.

“Johnny tells me you live in Fresno,” Laura said. “How was the drive down?”

Christ, whipping out the traffic question first thing? What was she thinking? She was going to look desperate.

“Made it in late last night,” said Lucille, “spent about three hours in stand-still traffic, but at least now I feel like I've earned my merit badge for surviving California freeways.”

Laura laughed. “Oh, I'm sorry, but there's way more than one,” she said.

“Ow!” said Daniel, when Johnny finally escaped and hunted him down in the kitchen to flick his finger against the back of his head. He looked around in outrage, oven mitt hand coming up to rub the abused spot. “What was that for?”

“When you suggested this whole thing, I assumed you'd be out there with me,” said Johnny, and then he blinked and looked the other boy over, because he was wearing a red apron.

“Didn't realize you needed supervision,” said Daniel, not noticing his look because he was busy being superior. “Weren't you the one who said you were *so* great with mothers – *ow!*”

Johnny dropped the attacking hand in favor of hooking two fingers under neck loop of the apron. “What's with this?” he asked, tilting his head to really take it in. The strings were doubled up tight around his waist, making him look particularly grabbable: a nice little package, all wrapped up. He was so ridiculous sometimes.

“Well, Johnny,” he said slowly, seemingly oblivious as Johnny tugged him drifting forward, “sometimes, when a guy is cooking a meal for *an entire house* and he doesn't want to make a mess of his clothes for when he sits down at the table to eat with everyone, he puts on a piece of cloth to – what are you doing?”

“Nothing,” said Johnny, and he ducked his head.

Daniel made a slight sound of surprise that slid into one of interest and he kissed him back. He rose up on his tip-toes and hooked his elbow around Johnny's neck. The hand in the mitt pressed against his back.

“Guess that means you're feeling a little better?” Daniel murmured against his lips.

“A little,” said Johnny, because just then it was true.

Johnny vs Busy Hands

After nearly burning the dinner rolls, Daniel banned Johnny from the kitchen. Johnny figured he could probably coax him into changing his mind without too much trouble – get him up on the counter, and there was no telling where it would stop – but someone could walk in any moment and anyway, he didn't want to be blamed when dinner was ruined.

He poked his head into the main room, overheard something about *mandatory overtime*, and ducked back out. He rocked on the balls of his feet, stymied. He listened to the quiet murmur of their mothers' conversation, the clatter of dishes being moved in the kitchen. His eyes slid to the back door. He moved and let himself out into the quiet outside.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, when Mr. Miyagi glanced over from where he was sitting on the edge of his deck. “I was just – looking for some fresh air.”

Mr. Miyagi merely turned back around. After a moment, he beckoned with his hand over his shoulder. Johnny cautiously approached and sat a couple feet away from him, swinging his legs over the side of the deck. He watched him work on the thing in his lap, carefully threading a slim wooden pin through a matching hole in the base. It was a wooden toy truck of sorts.

He wondered if the man was hiding out here. It's what he would do, if his house was suddenly full of people he didn't really know. But no, Mr. Miyagi was probably above that sort of thing.

“How head?” asked Mr. Miyagi, turning the toy for examination.

“It's,” if he had to say *fine* one more time, he thought he might smash his head against a brick wall, just to change the answer, “better than it was.” He paused and added, “Thank you – for the tea.” It was so disgusting, he didn't add. Maybe the man didn't know; maybe he loved it, drank it every night.

“Welcome,” said Mr. Miyagi, and then he lifted the toy and presented it to Johnny. “What Lawrence-san think, will child like?”

Johnny carefully took the truck and turned it over in his hands, feeling the solid wooden weight of the hand-crafted item. He spun one

of the wheels, testing. After a second, he worked out the back of the truck could lift and tilt. A dump truck, then. It was kind of neat.

“Yeah, sure, this is cool,” he said. “You made this? Who's it for?”

“Lady friend has small nephew,” said Mr. Miyagi, and then suddenly he was handing Johnny more stuff – a stretch of fine sandpaper and a little brush. He pointed out the fine ridges along the edge of the truck's back, and the bristled edges of the wheels that appeared ready to offer splinters if handled the wrong way. “Sand left to right only. Then brush clean.”

“Oh – okay,” said Johnny. He watched as the man climbed back from the edge of the deck and stood. His brow pinched. “Is this like, a karate thing?” he asked him.

Mr. Miyagi paused, maybe frowning. “If boy wish, everything can be *karate thing* .” But Johnny thought his tone was saying maybe everything shouldn't be. He looked back down at the truck, and the man changed his tone, softening it. “When head so quiet, hands can be busy. Focus on wood. Feel it. Think – nothing else.”

“That should be easy,” muttered Johnny, because how many jokes has he heard about that over the years?

But Mr. Miyagi only said, “Good.”

“Ah, he put you to work, huh,” said Daniel a while later. He crouched down next to Johnny, looking flour-smudged and a little tired as he watched Johnny's hands carefully move over the toy with the sandpaper. “He tried to sucker me into that yesterday.”

“And you said no?” asked Johnny skeptically, because that didn't seem likely. Daniel would jump off a bridge if his sensei asked him to, probably.

He sighed and leaned into his side. “Okay, *no* . It's only, Yukie has a lot of nieces and nephews, and they have kids too. I guess when one sister decides to remain unmarried and childless, the younger one feels she has to make it up to the whole family. He's got at least three more toys he's working on in his shed.”

“Must be weird, having siblings,” said Johnny, squinting down. “And

then those siblings have kids with siblings, and suddenly you're really outnumbered."

"I don't know," mused Daniel. "I think it would be nice to have someone around to take some of the flack off my hands now and then."

Johnny couldn't argue with that, except he thought if he had a brother or sister and had to watch them deal with Sid, he wouldn't like that too much. Dutch had a brother five years older than him who left home at eighteen, moved to New York and never came back; Dutch never talked about him, but Johnny remembered how he was after it first happened. Yeah, Johnny didn't think he'd like to have siblings. Only thing worse than one expensive proposition is two.

He brought the toy up to study it in dimming light of the evening. He blew hard, and a fine layer of sawdust scattered into the air, pale as dust but smelling much nicer.

"Dinner ready?" he asked, turning the truck over in his hands.

Daniel pressed a kiss to his shoulder and sat back. "Yep."

Lucille & Reading Between the Lines

Lucille has tried very hard for Daniel's sake to keep an open mind. While sitting alone up in Fresno, it had been too easy to look ahead to this dinner and let the assumptions fall in place like bricks in a defensive wall. But it was absurd at her age to be nervous about meeting another woman, so she'd decided to just not be.

What's she like? she'd asked Daniel on the phone, and her ever-reliable son had reported, *she's really nice, and um, blonde.* And she sure was: very blonde and very pretty. The delicate earrings in her ear probably cost more than Lucille's car.

But hey, it wasn't easy, deciding to make a big change in the middle of one's life, so Lucille was going to ignore all that (though a voice in her head said Laura didn't look like she'd quite reached middle age yet).

Laura looked away from the kitchen window and the sight of her son sitting watching Daniel and Mr. Miyagi go through a kata under the pretty yellow garden lights. She finished drying the plate in her hand and set it carefully aside before reaching for another.

“So what do you think of all this, really,” she asked Lucille.

“What do I think? I think motherhood is an endless choose-your-own-adventure, except someone else is always doing the choosing.” She shrugged. “I don't know – I raised Daniel to think for himself. Had to resign myself a while ago to the idea that might lead places I didn't expect.” She hit the tap on to rinse a cup and gave the other woman a look. “You know, he didn't say a word to me about it? Just dragged Johnny up to Fresno and went, oh by the way....”

Laura smiled. “That's one confident kid you got there.”

Lucille lifted a baking tray from the stack on the side and started scrubbing. “Sometimes I think he's too confident for his own good.”

“Worse things to be,” said Laura. She dried another few plates, and after finishing each one she opened her mouth as if to say something, but she couldn't seem to commit to the words.

Lucille glanced sidelong at her. “Something on your mind?”

Her eyes found the window again. “A few days ago, after the – the

incident, Johnny told me about last year. With Daniel – the bullying."

"Ah," she said, noncommittal.

The less said there, the better, she thought. She barely knew this woman. Not like they could change the past, and who knew what the future contained. No point burning bridges. She was sure she could find another half-dozen appropriate phrases if she let herself carry on.

"I'm not trying to make any excuses for myself," continued Laura. "It's only – I keep thinking. About where it came from? The place he was going to for karate, yeah, sure. But I think that was only part of it, and that's what really gets me."

"Your ex-husband, he a pill?" asked Lucille evenly, frowning at a stubborn bit of hardened crust on the tray. Daniel hadn't greased the pan well enough.

Laura leaned her hip against the counter and considered the question with a frown. Finally, she said:

"My ex and I, we got along fine most of the time. Fine enough, anyway. I used to like how he was – very blunt, very, I don't know. Honest. You never had to wonder what that man was thinking."

Lucille scraped the last of the soggy burnt crust from the pan and hit the tap again.

"But I think after a while, you start to miss it," said Laura quietly. "You forget what it feels like to wonder. And so now I ask myself... what did that do to Johnny? All that time spent not wondering."

Geez, when it came to words, the boy clearly didn't take after his mother, Lucille thought. Aloud, she said diplomatically, "He seems like a good boy."

"He is," said Laura, and the firm defiance of her voice had Lucille glancing over across the running sink. They looked at each other.

"Look, Lucille," she said insistently, turning fully to her, "what do you really think about all this shit that's going on – with the boys and the fighting? Daniel's black eye and now this," and she jerked her head to the window.

She wasn't surprised at the topic, only that she hadn't been the one to bring it up. She turned off the tap and braced her wet hands along the

edge of the sink.

“After last December, I thought it was all over,” she told her, and it wasn't possible to mask all the bitterness. “But I guess there's always going to be more people who come around. And I can't protect him from all of them.” She hadn't been able to protect him from any of them.

“Not all of them, maybe,” said Laura, and she covered Lucille's hand with her own. Lucille looked down at it and then up again, meeting her eyes warily.

“But what about some of them?” asked Laura.

Johnny vs Back in the Saddle

“But – I mean, are you sure?” asked Daniel, snatching the hand holding the key to the Avanti behind his back. He looked up at him earnestly, wide brown eyes unshadowed by guile or any kind of ulterior motive like wanting Johnny to do what Johnny then did, which was crowd close and reach again for the keys.

Daniel twisted in the circle of his arms and backed up a step over the gravel of the driveway. “Like, you're sure-sure?” he asked, insistent.

“Daniel,” he said, not quite patiently, “give me my goddamn keys.”

He held out just long enough for Johnny to grab him by the elbows, and then he went soft and pliant, melting against his chest. He sighed and, behind his back, his fingers opened around their prize. His knowing gaze tracked Johnny's expression as he plucked it from his hand.

“Can you really blame a guy?” he said as Johnny stepped back. “Soon as you get behind the wheel of that car, it'll be like I don't even exist.”

Johnny rolled his eyes. “You could always get in the car with me,” he said, spinning the keyring around his finger and catching the keys solidly in his palm.

Daniel shrugged and put his empty hands in his pockets. “Nah, my mom's only going to be here for a couple days. Think I should probably spend some quality time in with her. Besides, you and the Avanti probably need some alone time? I'm sure you have a million things you want to say to her, promises to make, a recommitment of your love....”

Johnny walked backwards, towards his one true love (apparently). “I guess I forgot this part from last year, you're kind of the jealous type, aren't you.”

Daniel followed him over to the Avanti, watching Johnny hop the door and settle behind the wheel before bracing his hands over the side and looking down at him. “Yeah, me and John Lennon, we just can't help it.”

Johnny only half-heard him. He smoothed his hands around the familiar leather of the steering wheel, and checked the gauges on the

dash. He'd expected to feel relief, happiness – and yeah, he was feeling all that, but something else was edging up behind them, sucking at the light.

Last he'd driven her, he thought it was all over. He'd felt like such a failure.

“Something wrong? I didn't adjust your seat so much as an inch, so don't try to say I messed with it. Left your presets on the radio alone, kept her fueled up... Johnny?”

“What?” He glanced up at Daniel's concerned face. “Oh, yeah. Great.”

The humiliation was finally over, but he couldn't let go of the memory of how it had felt. They tried to take everything from him; when he looked out the windshield of the Avanti, he let himself realize how close they'd come to succeeding.

“You sure you're good to drive?” asked Daniel, and this time he didn't sound like he was teasing.

“I'm good,” said Johnny quickly. “Really.” He looked past him to where his mom had just exited the house and called, “Race you home?”

“*Johnny*,” said Daniel, his mom, the whole world.

Johnny vs More Stakeout Difficulties

A few days later, when the rest of the world had gone back to work and holiday shopping or however the rest of the world got its daily kicks, Johnny found himself sitting in Dutch's Lincoln across from the old dojo, listening to Dutch slowly go stir-crazy in the driver's seat.

“This is stupid,” said Dutch.

“Yeah,” he agreed, and continued doodling the cobra from the dojo's sign in the corner of the Chinese takeout menu he'd found in the glove compartment.

“If we were going to sit around waiting, we might as well have done it as a group *inside* the dojo. Lie in wait, you know? Like snakes in the grass.”

“You just wish Jim was here,” said Johnny absently, shading in the scales along the cobra's hissing head. Then Dutch punched him hard in the arm, and he jerked and looked around. “Jesus, what the hell?”

“What the fuck's with you?” said Dutch hotly, whites showing around his eyes. “What's that supposed to mean?”

He started to roll his eyes. “Oh, christ, give me a break – wait, you serious? Really?” Dutch tried to punch his arm again, but Johnny blocked it. “Hey, quit it man,” he said sharply.

“Oh, what?” he scoffed. “I didn't go for your precious soft head.”

“Okay,” said Johnny, fed up. He threw the takeout menu to the floor. “You know what—” and he twisted in his seat and went for Dutch's gut. The shot was blocked and Dutch grabbed both his arms. They grappled hard for a few seconds, grunting and twisting: knocking back into the seats; the dash; the ceiling of the car; and finally, fatally, the car horn.

They froze, blinking out the windshield.

Across the street, Mike Barnes glanced around in disinterest before finishing his walk to the corner. He disappeared inside the dojo.

“Wait, that's—”

“Yeah,” said Johnny. He sank slowly back into his seat, staring fixedly

at the dojo. “Do you think he saw us?”

“I don't know. Didn't look like he cared if he did.”

Johnny bent and snatched the takeout menu up. “Time is it?”

“Six.”

Johnny jotted that down below his unfinished sketch of the cobra. He tapped his pen against the paper.

“...Now what?” said Dutch.

He grimaced. “Now we wait until they leave or until it's 7:30, whichever comes first.”

“Why 7:30?”

“Daniel calls at 8 – oh shut up man,” said Johnny, when the other boy tossed his head back and started making a jerk-off motion while groaning obnoxiously. “You *wish* Jim called you.”

For a fraught moment, Dutch looked like he wanted to launch across the car again, but instead he threw himself violently back against his seat and slouched down, hand braced over his forehead like he was trying to duck someone's gaze from outside.

“Do you at least do anything on the phone?” he asked after a moment. “Please tell me it's not all faggy shit, like *oh I wish you were here right now, I'd give you a back rub and feed you chocolates.*”

Johnny kept his gaze trained on the dojo and said, “Is that what you fantasize doing with Jim?”

“Fuck you,” he said instantly.

“Fuck *you*.”

They stewed in silence for a while, and finally Dutch made an aggravated noise deep in his throat. “Look, you wanna go in there and settle this right now?”

And yeah, Johnny kind of did. It looked like Mike Barnes wasn't even limping. But: “Bobby would never let us live it down.”

“I'm not scared of him,” muttered Dutch, but he didn't move. “Are we seriously going to do this again tomorrow just to confirm the time?”

“No,” said Johnny, because now that he's seen Mike again, he's seen enough. “We know how Cobra Kai trains before a tournament. Not like they're going to skip a day.”

Daniel vs Priorities

“You're in an interesting mood,” said Daniel. He reached over to nudge a slice of cheese back into place on the sandwich Johnny was assembling; his finger was slapped away before he could make contact. Geez, touchy.

“Interesting,” said Johnny, giving the mustard bottle a solid shake before squirting it loudly over two slices of bread.

Daniel kicked his legs over the side of the counter. “What is?”

“No, I mean – interesting is an interesting word to use.”

“Is it?”

When he first arrived, Johnny had swooped in and kissed him hard and hoisted him up onto the kitchen counter and *then*, instead of doing anything *interesting* with that idea, he'd turned away and started making sandwiches. Daniel felt a little like he'd been put on ice, or like, in storage. Hold that thought, Daniel. Just a minute, Daniel.

Well, whatever. Johnny wanted to make them lunch. He could eat. Except he wasn't staying long, and if Johnny felt like he was up for it... shouldn't they celebrate? Johnny was acting like he wanted to celebrate. He tapped, he shuffled, he threw these quick, quiet smiles that made Daniel want to hide his face in his neck for the rest of the day because honestly, how was this guy even real?

He was practically giddy, or the closest Johnny ever got to giddy. A restless energy suffused his every move, and Daniel's just saying, he knew where the other boy could put that energy, if he had too much. Come talk to Daniel over in storage, he knows what he's doing. He's got deals year-round; you won't believe the loads he can handle.

Johnny picked up the mustard-sodden slices of bread and carefully draped them over the waiting sandwiches. He pressed down (way too hard: Daniel could see the bread squish; farewell, hard-won gluten structure) and then stood back and eyed the plates intently.

“I actually have to go soon,” said Daniel, meaningfully.

Johnny switched his gaze from the sandwiches to Daniel, and his eyebrow rose, vaguely insulting. “Yeah, me too,” he said, and he

finally slid over into the waiting space between Daniel's knees. He leaned in and scraped his teeth over the pulse in Daniel's neck, and okay, that was more like it.

“Cool, uh – hm.” His head tipped up, giving him room to maneuver. “So what're you doing, anyway?”

“Going with the guys to take care of a thing.” Johnny slid a hand under his shirt and rubbed distracting circles into his waist with his thumb before going higher. “What about you?”

Daniel blinked at where the opposite wall met the ceiling and noticed it was a little gauzy with cobwebs.

“Oh, you know, training,” he said vaguely, working his hand down between them. Johnny's dick started firming up for him under his jeans, and it was kind of not fair he had to tell it he couldn't, not today, or at least: not right now, not like that – but soon? Did dicks understand the concept of delayed gratification? Daniel knew his sure didn't.

Onward, Johnny kissed: onward up Daniel's neck towards his mouth, which he then took with such enthusiasm, he nearly knocked Daniel's head into the cabinet overhanging the counter. His arm came around Daniel's middle to pull him safely away, crushing him to his chest and this was the way it was supposed to be, always. Daniel was caught in his arms and had no interest in escaping.

“Want to do something later?” asked Johnny between quick, snatching kisses.

It took him a few seconds to reply. On one hand, Daniel thought he might be pretty tired by the time he was done training with Terry; on the other hand, if Johnny's current mood persisted, maybe he wouldn't have to do any of the work?

“What'd you have in mind?” he asked, pushing and shifting forward: communicating silently to Johnny that he should back up and let Daniel down, which he did only to press him back again, grinding him into the drawer containing the silverware, nearly bending him backwards over the counter.

“Anything, whatever you want,” said Johnny, which was a *lie,* or at the very least a promise Daniel didn't get to cash in on yet.

Front sweep, he thought a little desperately as he wrapped a leg

around Johnny's. It was *so* important that he not stay here for the rest of the afternoon getting manhandled all around the pool house by a delightfully eager Johnny. He had to learn some offensive moves. Like, probably. No, no. Definitely.

Definitely-probably.

Johnny stepped back and hauled Daniel along with an uncompromising hand in his waistband, and seriously, his timing was just the worst, this was so unfair.

“Maybe see a movie?” asked Johnny, oblivious to Daniel's existential torment. “Or we could – we could just drive someplace?”

“Well,” said Daniel, giving up as they half-stumbled across the threshold of Johnny's bedroom, “you know I love guessing what the stars might look like behind all that smog.”

“Cool,” said Johnny, and he kicked the door closed.

Johnny vs Listening Again

Because the space between thought and movement was no space at all, and because it was all about to be over, and Johnny did well with finish lines—

His body wanted to share the joy of what his head knew, but of course Daniel couldn't know about that, so the celebration was a little one-sided. But only a little, because Daniel seemed pretty happy anyway. It was one of the most incredible things about being with him: making him happy and realizing over and over again how good that could feel. It was as simple as a smile, as eternal as his laugh. Or, yeah, the way his dick got hard as soon as Johnny touched him.

And Johnny could touch him again. He didn't plan on ever stopping.

“How much time do we have?” he asked, kneeling above Daniel to drag his shirt off. He paused and looked down at him. “Wait, you're going to eat the sandwich I made, right?”

Because Johnny had made it for him, and it didn't really count as kicking off the sneaky new stage of their relationship where Daniel let him do stuff for him if Daniel didn't actually eat the damn sandwich. Maybe he should've made him eat it first. But you weren't supposed to eat right before a workout, and Johnny kind of planned to make Daniel work for it.

Daniel wasn't listening; whatever, Johnny would make sure he took the sandwich with him when he left.

Daniel dragged his jeans down, and Johnny planted a knee on the denim bunched between his legs before he could get them down past his calves. He met the slightly pissy look he was given with a smirk and lowered himself over the other boy. He cupped Daniel's dick and squeezed softly, watched the flutter of Daniel's throat, the way he threw his head back.

“How much time?” he asked again.

“I – not, not enough. I – training, remember? I got training.” But he was squirming beneath him, legs fighting the constriction of the jeans and trying to spread.

“Oh,” said Johnny, getting a hand beneath him so he could palm his

ass. He cast a look down at the other boy's straining body. “Do you think it would be distracting?”

Daniel's mouth clamped shut, and he breathed out hard from his nose.

“I could go slow,” he said, watching Daniel's face darken. “You'd still be able to do kata, and I bet you'd only feel me a little.”

He used his free hand to undo his fly, take out his dick. He ground into the crease of Daniel's trembling thigh and listened to him. It was such a relief to be able to listen to him again.

“You're always saying you want me to train with you,” he said, kissing the underside of his chin, dragging his nose through the sweat rising along his hairline. He squeezed him again and slipped a couple fingers down, questing. “It'll be like I was right there with you.”

“Jesus christ,” said Daniel, giving in. And when he started to thrash in earnest, Johnny finally let up, let him kick off the jeans and open for him and for the next while nothing else mattered. Nothing else could possibly matter.

Daniel vs In the Dark

Right, so Daniel's commitment to prioritizing his new training was off to a slightly rocky start, the kind of rocky start that involved a lot of rocking back and forth on Johnny's lap while sucking on his tongue. But it was fine: Johnny'd kept his promise and gone slow, and Daniel was only feeling it a little as he shifted the Ford through traffic and drove over to the Cobra Kai dojo. It was fine.

(Johnny had a freakish amount of control when it came to sex, it was like he could decide to just not come and then he *wouldn't*, not until he was satisfied with where Daniel was at. One of these days Daniel was really going to have to put that control to the test, see if he could get a little payback. He figured there was nothing wrong with turning sex into a competition, not when your boyfriend was Johnny Lawrence. That's why he and Johnny were like, meant for each other, probably.)

God, he couldn't believe he seriously had to go stretch and practice some kicking and punching right now. What the hell.

Daniel was a little annoyed with himself for failing so spectacularly on day one. And he was even more annoyed that he couldn't be annoyed with Johnny for teasing him into it – it wasn't like Johnny knew of any reason why he shouldn't get to fuck Daniel boneless into his bed in the middle of the afternoon. He was innocent like that.

No, it was one hundred percent Daniel's fault, and Daniel didn't like things being his fault, so he was in a bad mood before he even stepped foot inside the dojo. Poor Terry didn't deserve this. And it wasn't like Daniel's mood was going to be improved any by huffing and puffing and hitting things, so he was basically stuck with this mood for the rest of the day, or at least until he got to go make out with Johnny someplace.

He wondered if Johnny would give him a blow job, as an apology for fucking him before training. Truly, there was no way Daniel lost here, and shouldn't *that* make him feel better at least? Well it didn't.

He shook his head and chewed on his lip. He needed to buckle down and get serious. He needed to remember that Johnny being better didn't mean anything was actually over. Daniel still had a fight to get through, and if Terry was right, he had a lot to learn in not a lot of time.

It was a good thing he was a quick learner, Daniel thought.

The dojo looked the same from the outside as he remembered, and it felt very strange to walk down the sidewalk beneath the cobra banner and willingly go inside. He had to remind himself it was just a place, one cheap storefront in Reseda among many. It might take some elbow grease, but he was sure Terry could scrub the evil from the walls in time.

Inside, the main room was empty. And really dark? The overhead lights were off and the windows all blinded.

“Hello?” he called out. He looked around for a light switch, because seriously, someone could trip on the edge of the mat or something. Daniel recently had had to read through a bunch of rules and regulations about opening up a commercial space in the valley, and those were no joke. You didn't want someone spraining their neck and then hitting you with a million-dollar lawsuit, after all.

“Daniel,” greeted Terry, emerging from the back room. He was barefoot in a black gi that gaped at the chest. He somehow looked larger in it than he ever had in jeans and a sweater.

“Hey,” said Daniel, nodding a little awkwardly. He looked around again; his eyes caught on a framed photo of John Kreese pouting and posing with a gun. “Dark in here,” he said after an odd pause. “This how you usually train? What's with the lights?”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” said Terry, not stopping his approach until he was on the edge of the mat and looking down at him. Maybe it was too damn dark to see him otherwise. Daniel should start doing neck stretches, if this was going to be an ongoing thing; Terry was *so* tall and didn't seem to realize he had a habit of looming. “I'm having some work done on the place.”

“Oh – I mean, okay. Eyes adjust, I guess.” Daniel cleared his throat and bent to untie his shoes. The ache in his ass intensified like a pulled muscle, and he gritted his teeth. God, *why* did he let Johnny—

“I've got a gi for you to wear if you didn't bring one,” said Terry above him.

Daniel straightened quickly. “A gi?” he said blankly. He gestured at

his shorts and shirt. “Can't I just....”

“You train in the uniform you'll fight in,” said Terry, and he didn't make it sound like it was an option. “You want to be comfortable with performing the attacks in a gi, don't you?”

Daniel hadn't really thought about it before, but that made sense. “Okay, uh – yeah, sure, if you have a gi here. Great. Thanks,” he added.

Terry smiled. “My pleasure.”

Johnny vs Carpooling

“Remember we're going there to send a message,” said Bobby. “That's it. This isn't a fight to see who will be the last man standing – so when I give the word to leave, I don't want any of you morons arguing. I say leave, we leave. Got it?”

Johnny raised the roll of tape and tore the length clear with his teeth. He smoothed over the free end and flexed his hands, testing the give and hold around his knuckles.

Across the table, Dutch was still wrapping Jim's hands; it had been his idea in the first place, wrapping. Sensei had never gone in for it, but apparently Dutch had learned how from the guys at his gym. Johnny was a little skeptical, but given everything lately, he was willing to go with a little protection. Especially if it meant Daniel not noticing any scuffing later that night.

“I said, got it?” asked Bobby, insistent.

“Jesus, Bobby,” said Tommy, who was scribbling over his knuckles tape with a pen. “Yeah, we got it.”

Johnny jumped up from his chair and started rolling his shoulders. He'd stretched before the others arrived, but he wanted to make sure he stayed warmed up.

“How many cars should we take?” asked Jim, who'd been very quiet since he arrived. He looked a little pale, but that was just how he got before a big fight. When it came down to it, he'd be there next to the rest of them, like always.

“We're taking the Avanti,” said Johnny.

It was already parked out front, waiting. He was done stashing it away like a scared kid; if Sid tried to do something about it, when the time came – he figured he'd handle that too.

Daniel vs The Quicksilver Method

Daniel wasn't complaining, but he did think it was a little odd that Terry happened to have a gi that fit him. He's always been a realist when it came to his stature vis-à-vis the rest of the world, especially the world of martial arts; smaller guys generally didn't go in for karate, it just wasn't as common. Which gave Daniel the sneaking suspicion that this training gi was actually meant for a kid, and boy, that really did not inspire him with any particular feeling of confidence. Johnny had always looked – and Daniel would go to his grave before he ever told him this – badass in his gi; Daniel was pretty sure he just looked like a guy who'd been held back with the beginners class.

They worked with some pads for a bit, and Daniel thought he was doing good, especially given the ache that crept down his thigh when he rose his leg above his waist. Terry didn't seem pleased, however.

“You're better than I thought,” he said, tossing the pads aside.

“Uh, thanks?” said Daniel, puzzled. What happened to *you're the champion, Daniel; you got this, Daniel*?

Damn, maybe his attitude was a problem. Mr. Miyagi had always told him to have more patience, and he knew when to talk him back down when he was getting too cocky – well, talk him down, or knock him down.

Meanwhile, Terry was walking around, voice switching into lecture mode. “Over the years I've developed a system of intensive short-term training – for situations just like this, actually.”

“That's handy,” said Daniel. He glanced over his shoulder to follow his progress around the room. Man sure liked to pace, couldn't keep still for even a moment. Reminded him a little of Johnny earlier. These karate guys. He hoped Terry had someone he could work off his excess energy with; seemed a real waste otherwise – speaking purely from a place of objectivity and all.

“It comes in two parts and has three rules – I call it Quicksilver.”

“Oh, hey,” said Daniel, drawing the word out. “That's good, Terry! Real clever.”

Terry nodded somewhat tersely. He didn't seem to appreciate Daniel's commentary, so Daniel folded his lips together. He committed himself to stop interrupting and just listen attentively.

“Rule number one,” said Terry, finally quitting with the pacing, which was nice – except then he was looming again, and you know, it was weird. Usually when people did this whole locking-eyes thing while making a point of how much taller they were, they were trying to push Daniel around. Unless it was Johnny doing it, and then he was just letting Daniel know he was thinking of kissing him, but that was unlikely to be the situation here, or at least Daniel really hoped so because talk about awkward and—

“Man can't stand, man can't fight,” said Terry; Daniel nodded, distracted. “Repeat it.”

He startled out of his thoughts. “Oh, uh – man can't stand,” but hang on, “he can't...” ...no?

Wait.

“A man can't stand, he can't fight,” said Terry, louder. There was an edge of impatience to his voice now, and Daniel wanted to respond to it, wanted to reassure him he was listening, really, but—

“But what's that mean?” asked Daniel.

Johnny vs Reserved Parking

“Jimmy,” said Tommy from the backseat, “if you don't stop bouncing your knee like that, I'm going to break it.”

“Sorry,” said Jim unhappily.

Johnny parked in the lot down the street from the dojo, in the same spot he'd parked for two years. For a while, he and Tommy used to race from school to see who could get to the spot first; after the tournament junior year, Tommy had stopped trying. They'd never talked about it.

Johnny cut the engine and switched off his headlights. They all got out of the car.

“You're absolutely sure you want to do this,” said Bobby, eyes on Johnny. “You know we've your back no matter what, but – I just want you to be sure this is how you want to handle it.”

The others looked over too, and Johnny met their eyes one by one. It felt good to have them with him again. Like Bobby said: no matter what.

“They want a fight so bad, they can have one,” said Johnny.

“Shit, can't win a tournament if you can't walk,” said Dutch. Beside him, Tommy shook out his wrists and muttered an agreement.

Daniel vs What He Believes

“What does it mean?” repeated Terry silkily; Daniel nodded, uncertain. “Let me show you.”

He crossed the three feet to where his weird sparring dummy of wood and metal sat, and in one swift, brutal move he snapped both of the wood struts serving as legs. Daniel flinched back before he could catch himself.

“That's what it means,” said Terry, pointing to the splintered wood. “It means strength. It means your enemies on the ground and not getting up. Done for, in other words.”

He advanced on him again, and Daniel had to stop himself from backing up. For some reason he wanted to look away, look down. Like if he hid his gaze, he could hide from the disapproval suddenly radiating from the other man. With difficulty, he made himself continue to meet his eyes.

“Man can't stand,” said Terry again, with great deliberation, like he suddenly thought Daniel was slow or something. “Man can't fight. You take your enemy's ability away from him before he has a chance to use it against you.”

Daniel swallowed. “You mean like – strike first.”

“Now that does ring a bell, yeah,” he said with a cool smile.

He shouldn't be surprised – he knew Terry had been close friends with Johnny's old sensei. He knew they came up in the same dojo, with the same training. He shouldn't be surprised.

Daniel swiped his tongue over his bottom lip. He shifted his weight, steeling himself for some awkwardness. “Look, Terry... I'm sorry, but I don't think that's for me? I don't – I don't believe in all that.”

For some reason, this made Terry's smile grow. “You don't *believe* in it?”

His tone was off. Higher. Mocking? Daniel blinked and opened his mouth to reply, but Terry was off again. More circling.

“Look around you, Danny,” he said, and okay, where the hell did *that* come from?

“I prefer—”

He loomed in front of him again, forcing Daniel to back up a step or bump into him. “Do you enjoy getting your ass kicked all the time? Maybe you're one of those queers, hm?”

“One of – what? And – no, of course I don't,” said Daniel. “And I'm not, anyway. Seriously it was just one black eye, and I wasn't expecting a fight that day, so I think people should stop making such a __”

“You know they hate people like us,” said Terry, uncompromising. Daniel froze. “Wake up, Mr. LaRusso. Do you understand hate? Real hate, when you've seen it – when you've felt the looks like a burn on your skin.” And his eyes were colder than any Daniel's ever seen: gateways to a place darker than anywhere he's ever been. “This is about survival. The world is always out to get you – the question is, are you going to let it?”

It might've called to him a year ago, was the awful truth. If he'd never met Mr. Miyagi; if he was never introduced to a world where he could stand and find balance even against the full crashing force of the wild Pacific. But the same world that had people who sneered and tried to push him around was the one that had his ma, and Ali who hadn't hesitated to smile at him that day on the beach, and Kumiko, who'd returned curiosity with curiosity. It had Johnny, who proved anyone could change.

“I'm sorry, Terry,” said Daniel quietly, “but I don't think I see the world like you do.”

For a moment, nothing. Then something like rage crept into the man's features: sharpening his face, transforming it beyond recognition. Daniel stared, too transfixed to move back like a distant voice was urging in his head.

Across the room, the doors to the dojo opened, and they both looked sharply over.

Daniel's heart, already trying to navigate a confusing obstacle course of conflicting impulses, nearly stopped as five tall figures filed into the entry space. Their faces were in shadows, bodies silhouetted against the light from the street – but it was obvious from the way they stood, the way the held their bodies: they were fighters. And they were blocking the only exit in the place.

One of them stepped forward. The streetlight shifting between the others' shoulders slid over his pale head of hair, and abruptly, Daniel could breathe again.

“Johnny?” he said, confused. “What're you doing here?”

“Daniel,” said Johnny, voice impossibly strange, “get away from that guy.”

Before he could process the words, let alone move, Terry stepped in close to his back and slid a hand over his shoulder. The hand was heavy, almost proprietary; Daniel tucked his chin to look down at it.

“But he just got here,” said Terry, and his voice sounded like a completely different person's for the third time that day.

Johnny vs Distractions

The cobras fanned out in the dark on either side of Johnny: Dutch and Jimmy to his left, Bobby and Tommy to his right. In another time, there would be dead leaves rustling underfoot, and an underclassman begging in front of them. On the mat, there was only the whisper of vinyl as they set themselves in place.

Daniel stepped away from Silver, bowing his shoulder so the man's hand slid off. But he didn't get out of arm's reach, didn't seem like he had any clue. He kept looking around at Johnny's friends instead of keeping an eye on the threat at his back – like Silver was someone familiar. Someone he trusted.

“What's going on?” he asked them all tensely.

And who was Silver? Not the humble guy in street clothes or the glittering lord of creep mansion. In his black, broken-in gi he finally made a deadly sort of sense to the eye. He stood in the shadows of the dojo like they were his home.

“Is there anyone else here?” Bobby asked Silver. “You got Mike Barnes hiding out in the back room or something?”

“Mike?” said Daniel, but even as he was visibly making the connection, Tommy spoke up:

“Yeah, you're on the wrong side, you fruity little turncoat.”

Daniel's head whipped around to follow him, body twisting, and with a nauseating jolt, Johnny finally understood what he was wearing.

“The hell you just call me?” demanded Daniel. Twin spots darkening his cheeks, eyes hot and wide. The others probably thought he was scared. He switched his gaze back to Johnny. “Johnny, what's going on?” he said again.

The thing most people didn't understand about Johnny was, he wasn't the best because he was the fastest or the strongest, though he was both fast and strong. Johnny was the best because he didn't get distracted.

Before last December, no one had scored so much as a point on him in over fifty matches. In a match, there was no thought or feeling to deal

with, there was only the fight. And he was a perfect conduit of power. He was clean. He never even really saw his opponent, just the body in front of him.

Daniel had changed that; he made Johnny look. And after Johnny looked, he couldn't help but see him.

Sometimes seeing was overrated. He didn't want to see Daniel standing in the Cobra Kai dojo, wearing a Cobra Kai gi. He looked a lot like a distraction.

“Dutch, Jim,” he said, eyes on the not-big-enough space between Daniel and Silver. “Go check the back room.”

He thought Silver might say something or try to stop them, but he only smiled like the whole thing was amusing. Dutch stared the man down with wide eyes as they passed, performed a full-body feint which Silver didn't so much as twitch at – if anything, the smile grew. Johnny didn't like that. He didn't like any of it; this guy didn't react like anyone else on the planet would to the five of them showing up at his door.

“I don't understand,” said Bobby, and he was looking at Daniel in puzzlement. “Why would you be here?”

“He's training for the All Valley, of course,” said Terry, pleased.

Johnny understood what he understood, and what he didn't understand didn't matter. It couldn't, not yet.

“Daniel, come here,” he said, but Daniel wasn't listening, he was looking back at Silver with eyes narrowed in uncertain suspicion.

“Terry? You know that Mike guy?”

“*Terry*,” breathed Tommy in disbelief, and what Johnny didn't understand didn't matter, because understanding wouldn't change anything. His hands balled into fists nevertheless.

Silver held his belt and rocked on his heels. “Apologies, Danny – I might've said something, but it is so hard getting a word in when you're going on and on about all the pathetic little problems you're having with your boyfriend. You really never shut up, do you?”

Before anyone can react to that, Jim came sailing through the air back into the room. He landed badly on his shoulder in a crumpled heap a

couple feet from Bobby; he didn't roll or catch himself.

Dutch followed, stumbling backwards from the darkened doorway, trying and failing to keep his footing. A fist came from the other room and struck him full in the face, and he fell too.

“What the fuck?” said Tommy, startling out of his ready stance.

Bobby was already bending to help them up when he froze, eyes stuck on the doorway and whatever he could see there. His face went awful with terror, and Johnny started forward, arms reaching.

“Guys,” groaned Jim, pushing his face up from the mat. “I was right, *I was right—*”

“It took a lot to bring you back here, back where you belong,” said the voice, and it was his voice.

Johnny stopped.

He was in the shadows, and then he was stepping into the room, he was there. It was him. “But it was worth it.”

Johnny's hands fell useless to his sides. There was movement elsewhere in the room – Tommy frantically helping Dutch and Jim drag themselves further from the doorway like every spare inch of distance might make the critical difference; a silent Mike Barnes slipping into the room along the mirrored wall; Daniel, shaking – but he couldn't really see any of it.

What Johnny didn't understand didn't matter. Sensei used to tell him, he didn't need to understand. He just needed to obey.

“Look at you all,” said Kreese, regarding them with a slow, approving smile. “Fighting as a unit, backing your teammate.”

“Do you understand now?” asked Silver, transferring his sickly delighted smile from Kreese back to Daniel. “Do you understand about hate?”

“Just like I taught you,” finished Kreese, and he looked right at Johnny for the first time since he tried to kill him.

It was Bobby who struck first, lunging forward with a wild shout and fists flying.

But Daniel was second.

Daniel vs Hitting People

Terry side-stepped his punch like it was nothing more than a small child's flailing. He grabbed the arm Daniel had thrown and used it to spin him around and present him to Mike like a training pad. Hit here. Don't hold back.

Mike didn't hold back.

Daniel doubled over, and his good friend Terry released him with a contemptuous shove. His knees hit the floor and he gasped against the mat.

The thing about fighting was, he never stopped being scared of it. Even after all he'd learned about defense.

His body was stubborn, always liked to play it out like an unawares teen in a slasher film edging around their inevitable doom. Except, difference was, he always knew he was in danger. He just didn't want to admit it. There was a certain wry cynicism you cultivate when you're bullied, the last mental and emotional line of defense: this is going to hurt a lot but boy, at least I can privately acknowledge how stupid it all is, right? Like that made it not count.

Neighborhood guys in an alleyway back in Newark, the cobras, Chozen's lackeys. Mike and the others. He learned to defend himself and they were all supposed to stop being terrifying. But his body was stubborn. It remembered the pain.

Didn't he get through it last time? Yeah, he always got through it. Through was the only possible way *out*.

Mike stepped close, and Daniel's eyes traveled the handful of inches across the mat to his feet. He gritted his teeth and wrapped a hand around the ankle of the leg Johnny hadn't stomped on, and he pulled with everything he had; Mike went down and Daniel lunged over him before he could push up again.

The dark room at his back was full of screaming and shouts and the dull thud of bodies being hit, and Mike's eyes were wide and furious locked onto him, and they were never going to stop, none of it was ever going to stop, and so Daniel pulled back his fist, and he hit him.

He hit him and hit him, and Daniel screamed down into his stupid

face and kept hitting, and somewhere in the distance, Johnny called his name.

Terry got a fist in the collar of his gi and pulled Daniel off like a kitten being lifted by the scruff of its neck. And then Terry threw the kitten into the mirrored wall.

The glass cracked and broke, shards falling around him in a shocking, glittering curtain fall. He shut his eyes. He shifted an inch and felt the sting of cuts on his ankle, his foot, and he froze.

He was still in a fight, not yet through, but he was in pain and scared to move. Glass clung to his hair, sharp edges threatening to fall to his neck or down the back of the gi. When he finally put his hand down to push himself upright – because he didn't have a choice, he *had* to move – the glass on the floor neatly opened the skin of his palm.

He wished Mr. Miyagi was there.

But instead, worse, Johnny was: Johnny who'd been keeping secrets, Johnny who was still recovering from a concussion. Johnny of Cobra Kai.

Daniel looked up to see him deliver a swift kick to Mike's face just as the other boy was starting to sit. He turned to sweep Terry's leg, but Terry merely stepped back over the move.

He raised his hands in a mocking show of truce and said, “He's all yours, lover boy."

Johnny didn't need to be told twice.

“C'mon,” he said tersely, unhesitating as he knelt in the broken glass and gripped Daniel's elbows. He didn't look at his face, busy directing his feet safely over the broken glass littering the floor. “We gotta get out of here, *c'mon*.”

Terry smirked as they limped past and joined the cobras dragging each other towards the door. “We'll see you at the tournament, Danny," he called cheerfully. "This was just a preview. In a few weeks, you're going to be in a world of pain. But don't think of dropping out. We know where to find you.”

"All of you," said Kreese.

Daniel wanted to turn his head and yell a reply – something, anything

– but Johnny's arm tightened around him, uncompromising. He barely stopped to let Daniel grab his bundle of clothes and shoes, and then they were bursting out onto the street into the startlingly bright night. The world was so big after the suffocating confines of the dojo, and they were, every one of them, so small.

Johnny vs Daniel

Daniel
It's a fight.

It's going to be a fight, Bobby thinks wearily. He shuts his eyes and lets the breeze of the road sting the bruising and cuts on his face.

Daniel pulls into the parking lot a second or two after Johnny, cranking the wheel hard to the left and slamming on the brakes before the car's even fully stopped moving. He's out of the car and running before the engine's even finished whining down, leaving the door hanging open behind him. It's a testament to how much he's already lost his cool that he doesn't even bother to turn off the car.

Johnny's still sitting in the passenger seat, looking at the blood on his hands and the dashboard, expressionless.

"Is it broke, do you think?" asks Dutch, tipping his head back like his face isn't already hopelessly streaked with blood from his nose.

Jim peered at the blackening cartilage under the jaundiced cast of the parking lot light post. "Well, uh. If it is, you could probably pull it off?" he offers, because Dutch is so tough, it's probably true.

"It's not like you can get much uglier," says Tommy.

(He is not entirely sure he's not still dreaming. Everything has been a little bit surreal since the fight broke out, and he's been waiting for Daniel to show up and put a stop to it. Except Daniel never did. Instead he's been standing on the sidelines, watching the guys from Johnny's dojo beat the crap out of each other, and he was happy for him.)

"Can one of you idiots explain what you were thinking?" shouts Daniel, and he stabs a finger at Johnny. "He had a head injury not even *two weeks ago*. What the fuck is wrong with all of you?"

The Cobras stop talking. They all look over at Daniel in surprise.

“Stop, don't,” he says. “It was my choice.”
“Your choice,” he echoes. “I'm sorry, are there not four other guys standing here?” He makes a show of looking around at the Cobras. “Do none of you have a brain of your own? Or maybe there's just the one and you swap it around in exchange for beer?”
“Don't talk to them like that,” says Johnny tightly, because after what they've just been through with Kreese, the idea of anyone else going after them is unbearable. Daniel has no idea, none.
“You want to talk friends?” he says. “How about you explain what you thought you were doing with that guy Silver in there. Your buddy.”
“Oh no,” says Daniel, shaking his head. “No. You don't get to get angry with me about that, not when you apparently had some secret knowledge this whole time about him. You knew stuff and you never thought to take a second to say, 'hey Daniel, you know that guy that came around a while back? He's a fucking psycho!' The guy lied to me, alright? He acted like we were friends—”
“Why the fuck would a guy like that be your friend, Daniel?” he shouts. “If you could for once not be so fucking weird – why can't you just make normal friends, like a *normal fucking person*?”
His head goes back. He takes a sharp breath.
“I don't know,” he says after a second, trying to keep his voice steady. “I guess that's a good question.”
Johnny's heart sinks, and he tries to take a calming breath, the kind he tried with one of Daniel's sensei's katas.
“Look, I didn't mean—”
“No, no, it's a fair point—”
“God, shut up. Just *shut up*. That's not what I meant.”
And he's so angry, he can barely think. He's angry at himself for never telling Daniel about Silver. He's angry at Daniel, because on some level it's true, Daniel did this to himself.

“Jesus Christ, do you think they're always like this?” mutters Tommy.

“Maybe they fuck it out, I dunno,” says Dutch, and Tommy goes pale and makes a disgusted face.

“Guys, shut up,” says Bobby. Louder, he says, “Look, maybe we should all just... calm down, and figure out what we need to do next?”

"Don't tell me to calm down," says Daniel, there was no telling where
The idea of Bobby Brown trying to play me and I don't even know if there
was any kind of *reasonable* reaction one was supposed to have to this
insane situation.
"What we're doing next is, Daniel's going to drop out of the All Valley," he says.
"I'm not dropping out of anything."
Johnny stares at him.
"Didn't you hear them?" demands Daniel. "I mean, why do you think I was in there in the first place? You think I like all that crap? They're not going to stop."
He sets his teeth. "Well, what happened to, 'the police are going to take care of it'?"
Daniel says nothing.
"So – you lied to me."

Dutch goes *ooh* and Jim nudges him with his elbow, because it doesn't feel right to him, commentating when Johnny looks so destroyed. Maybe Dutch doesn't notice that kind of thing, he thinks. Dutch doesn't notice a lot of things.

"I didn't want you fighting," he says, thinking: I was trying to protect you.
"And what's so different about me fighting and you fighting?" Why can't you ever let me protect you?
"Because I don't like *hurting* people," he bursts out. He goes pale after the words are out.
He stops everything. Breathing. Thinking.
Daniel stares at him with wide, wet eyes, like he's shocked himself.
He looks like he wants nothing more than to throw himself across the lot, and it's so easy to picture how he'd fling his arms around his neck and plead, *I'm sorry, Johnny, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it.*
But Daniel doesn't move. And he doesn't take it back.
Maybe the image had only existed in Johnny's head.

"Funny, you sure looked like you liked hurting Mike Barnes back in the dojo," says Tommy with an edge to his voice, breaking the silence that had grown.

He kicks away from the car, and Dutch immediately follows, dropping the bloody hand from his nose. Behind them, Jim

frowns down at the ground, and Bobby rubs his face.

"Yeah," agrees Dutch slowly, folding his arms across his chest and putting on a furrowed, deep-thinking look. "And yet *still* – you got your ass thrown into a mirror? And you think you're going to beat them in the tournament?" He pitches his voice. "Johnny, better come get your boy before he gets ahead of himself. Again."

(Johnny does not move, relieved that the guy Daniel is angry with is already so far ahead of himself, he's not angry, staring blankly over the ice. He is not trying to get Daniel's attention, he is not thinking about it, he is not looking at Daniel at all. Daniel is just the only one in the room who knows Johnny has been left behind like roadkill.)

"We never actually fought," says Jim, but his quiet words are overlooked because of Bobby's, overlapping:

"You didn't beat me."

Daniel looks at him in disbelief.
"*Excuse* me?"

"You didn't actually beat me," says Bobby calmly; carefully.
"Which I only bring up because—"

"You've got some nerve," breathes Daniel. "After what you did to my knee? You could've crippled me, man—"

"I only bring it up," say Bobby loudly, red-faced, "to remind you that Cobra Kai fights dirty. They will hurt you, and they won't care. So walking back into that arena like it's last year all over again, like nothing's changed – it would be beyond stupid. I mean, the man faked his death! That should tell you what he's willing to do to win."

“He's right,” says Johnny quietly. He looks away from the street and meets Daniel's eyes. “You fight Barnes in that final, and he'll – he'll take you apart.” He can only say it because it's not going to happen. “Sensei won't let Cobra Kai be humiliated a second time. You need back up.”
“Johnny, I don't want you anywhere near that tournament,” says Daniel immediately.
You said, anything, he thinks desperately. You said you'd do anything. Didn't you mean it?
It's too late, he thinks at him. Even you know it's too late. Sometimes the truth of a person isn't something you can change.
But that doesn't mean you can't use it for good.
“I don't care what you want,” says Johnny.

Interlude: a glimpse at one possible future, a whiter shade of pale

Chapter Notes

a whiter shade of pale

He was twisting his face to surreptitiously wipe his running nose on his upper arm when the train bounced and jolted and he nearly lost hold of the tree. It tipped out into the aisle, and he lunged frantically after it: got a face full of needles, and then his neighbor got a face full of dirty look, but whatever, he made the save.

He wished there'd been someplace selling these things closer to home. He refused to feel guilty about bringing a Christmas tree on a train, because after nine months he's seen people haul way crazier shit on these things: entire drum kits or three-piece sectional sofas. And what was he supposed to do, take a taxi? That shit's expensive. They probably even charge extra for the tree. No way, man.

He could've tried walking, but it was a few miles and it had been snowing since noon. And sure, a snow-covered Christmas tree would probably look really pretty, but he thought Daniel wouldn't agree after the snow melted and left a puddle of water in the middle of their apartment.

Johnny adjusted his arms around his prickly burden, reset his knees wide along either side of it. He sighed up at the thick network of graffiti swirling across the top of the compartment. Some of the lines almost looked like highways, he thought. If he let his eyes lose the right amount of focus, he could imagine he was looking at a map.

Wait, how many stops had it been? He always zoned out so bad on the subway.

Shit —

So he ended up having to walk a little anyway. He just couldn't win.

At first he tried simply dragging the tree down the sidewalk, thinking the carpet of snow underfoot would protect it from damage. But after

half a block he realized how filthy the sidewalk really was: slush, salt, and that all-purpose indeterminate grime that seemed to settle over everything (back home the pollution was in the air, here it covered everything you touched; at the end of the day, your nails were clogged with it). So he had to stop and reconsider the situation as the snow continued to fall thickly all around, coating his shoulders and hair and melting to a cold damp.

He'd bought the biggest tree the lot had, a little over six feet, which meant it was more or less (more) as tall as him. So walking with it clutched to his chest didn't seem like a good option. And he couldn't hoist it aloft; all it would take was one good gust of this shitty winter wonderland wind and he'd be sailing backwards like a guy with an inverted umbrella.

Eventually he hauled the tree over his back. He had to hunch a lot so it didn't drag too bad, but he was able to soldier on down the street. Sometimes you just had to go through something and not think about it. It wasn't like it was going to last forever, and anyway, home was at the other end.

The neighborhood was more quiet than he'd ever heard it outside of the middle of the night. Snow muffled sound, it turned out. Cars cut slick slicing lanes down the center of the street, but many more remained stuck where they were on the side, tarped by the same white powder softening all the edges of the city. Thank god his car was in storage; it was the first time the thought had felt sincere.

The flurries made the air glow orange beneath the streetlights: light where there the previous night there'd only been shadow, and Johnny liked that part. For weeks, it had been so dark after work. Dark and cold, his world shrinking to just a couple boxes he shuffled to and from, work-box and home-box. Occasionally store-box if Daniel needed something. The snow didn't make it like day, but it made it something different, and he'd take it.

It was still cold, though. He wished he hadn't forgotten his hat and gloves that morning, but December couldn't make up its mind, and nothing had felt as pressing as the clock telling him he was going to be late for work (again). Now the chill of the evening air was working at him, creeping over the sweat he was building beneath his thin jacket. If he paused for even thirty seconds, he thought he might start to shiver. It was weirdly embarrassing.

He shed needles dragging the tree through the double set of locked

doors of their building. The smell of perpetual damp in the entryway and stale cigarette air leaking from 1B welcomed him in from the cold, and then of course the stupid elevator was broken again. So he had to haul the tree up four flights of steep, coiled stairs. Deeper attrition, he was losing needles like soldiers invading Russia in the winter.

It took his reddened, cold-numb fingers three tries to find the right key and slot it into their door, and then he was finally home: crossing the threshold and once again sliding from the crowded, drab, and cold outer world to one with light and warmth and Daniel.

“Hey,” came the bright voice from down the hall, “you're late. Dinner's gone gummy.”

“Got my reasons,” called Johnny, shoving the tree rustling forward so he could shut the door behind him.

He let out a long breath and carefully rested against the door a moment. There. At least that was done. He grunted and kicked off his soaked shoes, and of course he immediately stepped in some of the wet already collecting on the hard floor from the tree. He just couldn't win.

He hopped and muttered a curse, and meanwhile Daniel said:

“Johnny? You behind that thing or has the apartment been invaded by an Ent?”

He craned his head around the tree and said, “Ents aren't pine trees.”

(He wasn't a nerd for knowing what an Ent was; Daniel had been reading that shit aloud in bed before sleep for the past month, it wasn't his fault.)

Daniel smiled, because that's what he always did when he first saw Johnny in the evenings, but meanwhile his mouth was saying, “You don't know that. No reason they couldn't look like pine, if they wanted.”

“Why would they *want* to look like a pine tree?” said Johnny, a little impatient because why wasn't Daniel overcome with joy at the sight of his goddamn tree? “If you're an Ent, surely you want to be like – a sequoia. A redwood, something badass?”

“Can we get back to the point?” asked Daniel, and yeah, please. He

tipped his chin. “That thing's huge. Look, it's too tall for the ceiling. What're we supposed to do with it?”

Still not the ecstasy he was hoping for, but it was closer. Johnny squinted at the top of the tree, which *was* kind of bending along the ceiling, yeah. In the lot, he couldn't visualize how many feet they had to work with, and anyway, bigger was always better, wasn't it?

He looked back at Daniel and shrugged. “It'll be fine. We'll trim it. Isn't that in one of the songs, something about trimming the tree? Yadda yadda, holly, whatever?”

“You're not using my good kitchen scissors on that thing,” said Daniel, but he was looking at the tree again, and he was smiling (again).

Daniel cleared his throat, all businesslike, and quickly wiped his hands on the dish towel over his shoulder. He stepped forward, beckoning.

Johnny gratefully tipped the tree into his waiting hands and shrugged off his wet jacket before squeezing out from the tiny alcove. He circled and stepped in close, wasting no time in tucking his freezing hands under the other man's shirt. He ignored the harsh noise of protest this elicited. Daniel's stomach was very soft and very warm.

“I think it's a good size,” said Johnny. Daniel smelled like he'd been baking, and so he pressed the frozen tip of his nose into his hair and breathed in deep. “First Christmas in our own place – you deserve a big tree.”

“You sap,” said Daniel and then he paused, inspecting the base. He turned his head and asked, “Johnny, did you get a stand for this thing?”

And – right. Of course he forgot something.

“We'll get a tree stand tomorrow,” he said, improvising. “I had my hands full as it was, not like I could carry anything else.” That sounded pretty good, actually. “Besides, we need to get lights for it anyway.” Better than good, great. Completely intentional.

He helped Daniel lift the tree and take it down the short hall to their living room-slash-kitchen. There was no need to argue about where to put it, he figured, because even in this cramped unit, their paltry collection of possessions left plenty of space. The tree was going to look perfect against the western wall.

“Watch my bookshelf,” ordered Daniel. “To the right, the right—”

“It'll block the TV then.”

“You watch too much of the ole boob tube anyway.”

Okay, so they argued a little. That was Daniel's fault, though. Finally they reached an agreement, and Johnny carefully tilted the tree against the wall in its final resting place.

Daniel eyed it critically. “Do you think we should try to put it in water? How quickly do Christmas trees dry out? I don't want to be sweeping up hundreds of needles tomorrow.”

“Beats me,” said Johnny, and he took his hands away from the tree and turned to Daniel, who came willingly: mouth curving richly and eyes half-lidded. They hadn't seen each other since the night before; whoever claimed the days were short this time of year obviously didn't spend his missing Daniel.

But then Daniel looked down to the hands bracketing his waist, and all the warmth and light went out of the room like someone snuffed a candle.

Johnny really wished he hadn't forgot his gloves that morning.

Daniel grabbed Johnny's red-scuffed hands, but only so he could throw them away from his body like they were radioactive. “You've been fighting,” he said flatly.

He didn't sigh; Daniel got annoyed when Johnny sighed. “It wasn't – I mean, not really.”

“Right,” he said, and he stepped back, putting space between them. “I guess it was the Christmas tree that tore your knuckles up?”

He set his teeth. “Look, I didn't start it.”

“But I'm sure you finished it.”

“What does that even mean? Would you rather I get pushed and run away?”

Daniel blazed bright with incredulity. “*Yes!*”

“That wasn't an option,” he said, and as the other man turned away shaking his head, he persisted: “No, really, Daniel, you don't get it –

all the guys from work were there, I couldn't just *take* it. They'd never let me live it down! Add in the one or two who know about you, and I'd basically be toast."

"If it's that bad, then just get another job," he said, like it was easy. He twisted back around, already transitioning into nagging mode: "You promised – you *promised* – you were going to stop doing this."

"I didn't have a choice," said Johnny, and it felt like he was suffocating on the words, like he'd said them so many times they'd built up in his throat like all the grime in this city. One of these days he wouldn't be able to draw air.

Daniel took two quick steps forward and grabbed him, eyes wide and imploring. Johnny tried to look away because he couldn't stand it when Daniel looked at him like this. But Daniel gave his shoulders a shake, commanding. He met his eyes reluctantly.

"One of these days," said Daniel enunciating very clearly, like he thought Johnny was too slow to understand otherwise, "someone's going to call the police, and they're going to haul your ass to a jail cell. And it won't be a night in the drunk tank, Johnny. It won't be a joke you can tell your buddies about at the bar. This is serious – are you listening?"

Because Johnny was pulling away, trying to shrug him off. "Yeah, I hear you. Jesus, I get it, okay?"

He made the critical mistake of sighing, and Daniel flushed hard, spun up himself up more. This was how it always went in their arguments; the more Johnny retreated, the angrier Daniel got.

And Daniel wasn't done. "We're not kids anymore. We're three thousand miles from your mom's lawyer friend. You get busted for fighting, it won't be a funny story, it'll be a rap sheet."

"I said *I get it*," he said loudly down into his face. "Look, can we just – can we just forget about it, have a nice night? It's over, I'm fine and – and anyway, don't you like the tree?"

Daniel looked between him and the tree against the wall, expression going tight. "A dead tree, what's not to love?"

Two hours ago Johnny'd stood probing his ribs on the sidewalk outside the bar, neon liquor lights at his back bleeding his periphery into sun-on-your-eyelids red. Joey was still rambling enthusiastically

in his ear: *holy shit man, I've never seen someone kick like that outside a movie! You should go to LA, man, you should be in Hollywood....* Johnny looked up, blinking wetly against the cold, snow-filled air, and he saw the tree lot across the street: a quiet little corner wreathed in green, glowing under a string of yellow lights; a spot of life in the middle of the frozen asphalt wasteland that was the city. He stepped dumbly off the curb towards it and was nearly plowed down by a yellow taxicab.

“You just don't get it, do you?” said Daniel, venomous, and he stalked from the room.

Johnny's entire body fell after him. “Daniel – *Daniel*.” He followed him and got to the bedroom in time to have the door slammed in his face, a spare millimeter of grace for his nose. He tried the knob, but of course, it was locked. He knocked and said low to the wood of the door: “Daniel. C'mon, man.”

“Go to hell,” came the short reply.

And Johnny sighed again, because at that point the damage was done and there was no point holding it in.

Back in the other room, not knowing what else to do but carry on with the night, he went over to the stove and spooned a congealed helping of pasta into a bowl. He dug around the cutlery drawer for a fork and then leaned back against the counter to eat.

His eye drifted automatically to the side of the fridge, and the homemade advent calendar Daniel had presented to him a week ago after consulting an Almanac: *Avanti-mas!*

Only 102 days until the car was probably safe from the snow and salt and he could take it out of storage. A lifetime, in other words – but when he'd seen the calendar, he didn't care about that, he just grabbed Daniel and carried him laughing across the room like time didn't matter. It rarely did when they were touching.

Looking at the colorful, cheerful lettering made him feel impossibly worse, so he shoved away from the counter and went to eat on the sofa. There, he chewed through the cold bowl of noodles and eyed the growing puddle of snowmelt beneath the Christmas tree against the wall.

The neighbors above them thumped around on the ceiling. Outside, a siren was wailing in the distance. The tiny room felt somehow cavernous.

It was incredible how much he hated this apartment the moment Daniel was not there; the place couldn't hold any sense of his presence. It lacked some fundamental ability to feel like anything other than a small, dark box with bad plumbing which just so happened to, for a few precious hours every day, contain the two of them together. Daniel thought they just needed to buy a better lamp. He was stupid sometimes, about some things.

Johnny finished the pasta and sat staring down at the empty, sauce-streaked bowl. He flexed his right hand, felt the new scabs pull tight. To his eye, his hands looked the same as they always did. He wondered what Daniel saw when he looked at them: if he temporarily forgot how it felt when they held him. Maybe the knowledge wasn't enough anymore.

Johnny stood and carried the bowl back over to the kitchen, filled it with water and left it in the sink. He listened to the silence of the apartment some more and came to a decision.

The frame was cold to the touch as he hauled the window open, and outside was worse. It had stopped snowing, but the air was charged with the smell of it. The apartment's heat leeched out fast.

He thought about going to fetch his shoes, but they would still be soaked, and he didn't want to track wet all through the apartment. It was only a few feet across the fire escape to the bedroom window, and he figured he could make it in a few seconds and a couple large steps.

He ducked his head and climbed awkwardly through the tight space. Immediately regretted not grabbing his shoes as his bare feet met the snow-covered metal grate. It was always colder than he thought it could possibly be – it wasn't natural, for the world to be this cold. But it was too late now, he just had to continue. Don't think about it.

He conscientiously slid the window mostly shut and turned to find Daniel blinking at him from the other side of the fire escape.

He had brushed the snow away, made a space for himself below the bedroom window, and was wearing a blanket like a cloak. He didn't look angry anymore, just tired and kind of sad.

“So your plan was, what, break in through the window?” he inquired.

Johnny shifted in place, lifting and flexing his toes, which were stinging with the cold. “More like, I was going to knock on the window, hope you weren't so mad you'd let me freeze to death out here?”

“Holding yourself hostage, a time-tested strategy,” said Daniel. He spread his arm, opening the blanket in weary welcome. “C'mere, dummy.”

Johnny wasted no time crossing and lowering himself beside him. The metal of the platform was cold but Daniel was warm, and he thought the two could average out to bearable, if he focused enough on the latter. He pulled the blanket around his shoulder and curled close. And then, since the blanket wasn't big enough to close around them both and the air was sucking all the vitality from his body, he jostled Daniel until he got the picture and shifted to sit between his legs. Johnny pulled him in and wrapped the blanket firmly into place, and there, that was a lot better.

He thought they could hold out for a little while longer, like this.

“I can't believe all the bullshit you said about how great winter was,” he muttered into Daniel's hair. He looked down at the snow-covered neighborhood, the stretch of buildings huddled close up against the edge of the street like miserable commuters waiting for a taxicab. They were prettier in the snow, but they still looked like refugees.

“I didn't lie about anything,” said Daniel stubbornly, folding a hand securely around the arm at his waist. “You'll get used to it.”

Privately, he didn't think he would, actually. He couldn't imagine that a day would come where he would feel the cold first thing in the morning and not think about being back in California. The idea of home was like an anchor but one too weak to stop him from drifting. He felt like a different person out here: thinner, threadbare, somehow insubstantial.

“Why would you want to get used to it?” he asked.

“Because if you're going to live someplace and don't have a choice,” said Daniel, “isn't it better than suffering the whole time?”

It came too close to talking about why they weren't back in the valley. So he dragged his nose through Daniel's hair and said nothing.

After a long moment, Daniel sighed and asked, “You hurt anywhere?

Anything bad?"

The other guy had gotten in a couple good shots to his kidneys, but it wasn't a big deal. Daniel would see his back soon enough, though, so he tried to compromise between the delicate present and inevitable future by shrugging and muttering, *just some bruises*.

Daniel shivered hard, like he'd been holding it in. He turned in place so he could rest his cheek on Johnny's shoulder. He slid an arm around Johnny, clutching at his side tightly.

"Sorry about what I said, about the tree," he whispered. "I didn't – I didn't mean it. I like the tree." And then, abruptly: "Mr. Miyagi's not coming next week."

"*What*?" Johnny tucked his chin, tried to get a look at him, but Daniel dug in, refused to raise his head. Hiding. "Why not?"

Daniel had been talking about the visit for at least a month, angling for it for even longer. He sounded different when he talked to the man on the phone; Johnny had been looking forward to him sounding like that all the time, at least for a short while.

"Some mix-up with the airline or travel agent or something, I don't know. The new price for the ticket was like, double what he'd budgeted for." Daniel shrugged briefly. "Said he'd see us in the new year, maybe make a longer visit out of it to make up for missing this one."

And he was using that voice, the one he used when he was upset but didn't want Johnny to make a big deal of it. It was always a struggle, because anything that upset Daniel felt like it should be a big deal. It was like seeing the punch coming and not moving to block it.

Johnny tightened his arms around him and said only, fucking pathetically, "I'm sorry."

"Yeah."

Inside the apartment, from the cracked living room window: a terrible dragging sound followed immediately by a loud crash. The tree. Johnny felt Daniel fold his lips together against his neck.

"I'm sure your bookshelf is fine," he said, though with the way the night had gone, he didn't really believe it.

“We should go inside and check, huh,” said Daniel.

Johnny thought his toes were probably blue by now. “Yeah, probably.”

But for some reason they sat there for a couple minutes longer, holding each other in the cold. Johnny focused on what he could be sure of: the beat of the heart against his chest, the weight on his lap – the physical reality of Daniel. A different type of home, a better type of anchor. So long as that was true, he thought life out here was bound to get better.

Maybe in the spring, he thought: when all the trees were green again.

Johnny vs Numb Indifference

PART FOUR

Daniel turned to go and Johnny didn't bother to watch, was already going back to his friends, but of course he noticed when Bobby stepped unhesitatingly forward past him and crossed the lot.

“Daniel,” he said, as the other boy reached the open driver's side of the Ford. “Look, man, I just wanted to say – for what it's worth, I'm really sorry, okay—”

“Spare me,” said Daniel tersely. “You know you guys haven't changed at all?”

“...That's not fair,” said Bobby, who never could tell when something was a lost cause.

Daniel's reply was low and angry, rolling deadly and blinding across the concrete like mustard gas: “When he gets hurt again, that'll be on you.”

Johnny didn't catch Bobby's response, if he made one. There was a ringing of sorts in his ears, and his fists were tight pressure bombs at his sides. That's how Daniel saw him now, apparently. No wonder he didn't ever trust him to look after him; he didn't think Johnny could even look after himself.

Was there anything more humiliating than someone knowing you can be hurt?

(Sensei had smiled right at him, and they all knew, everyone in that room knew what he'd done to Johnny, what Johnny hadn't been able to stop.)

A door slammed. The Ford's engine roared as Daniel rough-shifted and tore out of the parking lot; he cut someone off merging onto the street, and the air filled with the sharp scream of car horns.

Johnny looked over in time to make sure the little idiot wasn't actually crashing the Ford. He watched the car's lights streak away down Sherman.

At his back, no one said anything at first. Then Dutch stepped forward and punched him in the arm. “Forget that guy, Johnny. Ungrateful little prick.”

“Yeah, it's for the best,” said Tommy.

“Shut up,” said Johnny, because they were talking like something had ended, and he couldn't stand it.

Johnny vs Gang-Running

“Okay, now that Johnny's little gay-ass drama is over with, can we focus on something that actually matters? Like what the fuck we're going to do about Kreese?” asked Dutch, and sometimes, Johnny was really glad to have him as a friend, actually.

“I can't believe he faked his death,” said Jim, folding his arms tightly across his chest.

“Yeah, well, he didn't do a very good job. Swear the bitch had tan lines.”

“But what's he thinking,” said Bobby, turning back to them. His brow knit. “All of his students dropped him, how does he think he's going to come back from that? We put the word around the valley he's scum, no way anyone joins his dojo now.”

“That's why he has to beat Daniel and his sensei,” said Johnny, and he could say it because it wasn't going to happen. “Beat him bad. Prove it was all a fluke, that we lost because we're weak, let him down.”

He could suddenly see it all too clearly: if Cobra Kai came back, they'd always just be the guys who failed the dojo. Stumbling forward through life without meaning or purpose or the basic ability to hold their heads up. Their choice to walk forever recast as a dismissal: a dishonorable discharge.

“Fuck that,” said Dutch.

Tommy swung in a tight circle and kicked a rock; it shot skidding out into the street, narrowly missing a passing van. “Years of eating shit for that guy, and we're going to let him get away with it?” he demanded.

“No,” said Johnny. “We're not.”

They all looked at him. After a moment, Bobby put his hands on his hips and hung his head.

“Are you seriously suggesting we have to go fight a bunch of high schoolers?” he asked on a sigh.

Johnny put his hands in his jacket pockets and shrugged. “You got a better idea?”

“Well, no, but – Johnny, we don't have a sensei. A bunch of fighters without a sensei isn't a dojo, it's a gang.”

Johnny thought about that. He spread his arms. “Fine, so let's start a gang!”

“Fuck it, I'm in,” said Dutch.

Johnny vs The Logisitics of Commie Shit

Johnny felt a familiar thrill of excitement: his body realizing there was a path forward. “Guys, I'm serious.”

“Unfortunately, that was never in doubt,” said Bobby.

“Look, who says you need a sensei to have a dojo?” The rising crest of discovery began to lift him, and he paced around in front of them. “Think about it. We've been fighting together for years. We know each other's weaknesses, what we need to work on – why can't we just continue training together, without Kreese?”

“What, like some kind of – karate co-op?” asked Jim.

Johnny frowned at him. “This isn't like your parents' weird hippie health food store, man.”

“Co-ops don't have to be stores,” he argued. “They could be for anything.”

“Sounds like commie shit to me,” said Dutch, and Tommy muttered an agreement.

Jim sighed. “It has nothing to do with Communism. A cooperative is a group of people coming together, pooling resources for common purpose. Doesn't that sound like what we're talking about?”

“Commie shit,” insisted Dutch, and this time Johnny joined the chorus of agreement.

“And where do we train?” asked Bobby. “My dorm room? Or maybe the living room of Johnny's mom's pool house?” As if Johnny was going to tell his mom about the tournament.

Johnny shrugged. “We'll go to the gym Dutch uses, over in Winnetka. It's got everything we need: heavy bags, mats – ”

“Big guys talking shit,” added Dutch. “Can't do without them.”

“Winnetka?” said Bobby on a sigh. “That's at least an hour's drive in good traffic, and I still have classes, you know. And finals coming up in a couple weeks.”

“Oh, me too,” said Jim suddenly, putting his hand up. “Finals. Yes.”

“Uh, me three,” said Tommy, but a little guiltily. If he'd gone to even half his classes, Johnny would eat his karate trophies.

“So we'll rotate, I don't know,” he said impatiently. “No reason we can't spar on the grass outside a dorm or whatever. The important thing is to get back into the motions of it. You think Sensei's not going to be working with Barnes every single day?”

There was an odd pause, which Johnny didn't understand as the others glanced around at each other. He replayed what he said in his head, and he got it. His face warmed.

“I meant – Kreese,” he said, stiff and awkward. The name felt odd in his mouth, constricted and sibilant; *Sensei* had a hundred different emotional connotations, *Kreese* just the one.

“Yeah,” said Bobby quietly. “We know, Johnny.”

Johnny vs Bobby's Problem

“Are you okay?” asked Bobby before leaving.

They were back in Encino, standing outside by the cars after the others had driven off. Johnny wasn't in any hurry to go inside the pool house, so he folded himself against Bobby's Audi and thought about it.

“I didn't fight him,” he said, and it was the first and only thing he could say on the subject. “I always thought – if I saw him again, I'd do something. But I didn't do anything.”

Bobby cocked his jaw, ruefully feeling out his teeth with his tongue. The bruise on the right side of his face was swelling into an impressive size, like a toddler had drawn his jawline.

“Well, I tried to fight him, and it didn't go well,” said Bobby.

“Yeah, you kinda got your ass kicked. Sorry.” Johnny folded his arms and looked down at the oblique shadows they cast along the concrete. “Is it weird I feel like I missed my chance? We're not going to be fighting him in the tournament.”

“Aren't we?” said Bobby.

Johnny closed one eye against the light of the house shining at him and peered sidelong at Bobby, who shrugged a little.

“It's not about whether we can take him in a fight,” said Bobby. “It's about stopping him from hurting anyone else.”

“Yeah,” said Johnny. He still didn't feel right about it.

“You know, it wasn't as weird as I thought it would be,” said Bobby, tone suddenly lighter: like he was inexplicably trying to make Johnny feel better, “seeing you and Daniel together, I mean.”

But you didn't, was all Johnny could think at first. It tilted his vision as he tried to make sense of what Bobby meant, and then he thought he understood, and he felt very strange. Because sure, Daniel and he argued about stuff plenty, but tonight had been different. They've never argued like this before. The idea of anyone watching that fight and nodding to themselves, *yeah, that's what I expected* – it made him feel like someone else. An alien, impossible to understand and fundamentally different.

“We don't always fight, you know,” he said. Don't even usually fight, really. Why fight when there were other things to do? “Tonight, that – it's not like that. With us.”

“Yeah, I know, man,” said Bobby, resting a hand on his back. “I didn't mean it that way. I just meant – I mean, he seems to really care about you.”

His throat went tight.

“Are you okay?” he said abruptly, because with all the noise and driving around, he hadn't really thought about it, and now it was easier to think about than his own problems. “I mean, you really – charged Kreese, earlier. Didn't think that was your thing anymore.”

It was Bobby's turn to fold his arms across his chest. He stared hard at the disappearing point of the winding street, and then he turned his head and met Johnny's eyes. His mouth twisted.

“He just looked so fucking satisfied with himself, you know?” said Bobby, and his voice cracked a little.

Johnny vs Aftershocks

Johnny's body felt heavy and slow as he let himself into the pool house. The light above the stove in the kitchen was on, but everything else was dark. At the end of the hallway, his mother's door was shut.

He had no marks on him to explain away, but he thought she'd probably still take one look at his face and ask what happened. She somehow always just knew; he'd spent a lot of time dodging her looks last year. He was relieved he wouldn't have to that night.

It didn't make any sense, how tired he felt. Unlike the others, he hadn't really fought anyone. A kick to Barnes's face, a failed sweep. Turned out getting your heart ripped out was really exhausting, maybe.

He wandered into his bedroom and fell forward onto his bed without taking off his shoes or clothes. He dug his face into the mattress and stared with his free eye through the darkness at the pale floorboard on the opposite wall.

He felt wrong. Almost like he had right after the concussion: his thoughts had been trying to hide themselves since Daniel drove off, since earlier than that even. Everything was a possible landmine, and if one went, maybe they'd all go, and what would be left after?

Because I don't like hurting people.

Johnny blinked hot, dry eyes at the floorboard.

Hurting people was a thing Johnny did in the past. He hurt Daniel. He hurt plenty of kids, and Kreese had always smiled at him, like he'd smiled at Johnny tonight. Those smiles used to mean so much to Johnny: rarely given, briefly bestowed. The smile said, you're closer. I can almost see who you're supposed to be. You're doing good.

But Johnny hadn't done good. Maybe not ever – it was hard to think back and try to see the line, if there was one. Was it poison from the beginning, from the very first day he pulled the thick, rough cotton of a gi over his thin shoulders and set his feet on the mat?

He hurt people, but did he like it? Was that the part that made him feel so alive when he fought? He'd thought....

Karate had unfolded in his mind like there was a space waiting for it. Looking at Daniel's karate, he now knew he didn't have to fill that space with hurting people. (He remembered: air and water and green all around him, something in his chest opening to reflect the sky his kick cut a clean arc through.) But his karate wasn't the same as Daniel's, and maybe it was too late to do anything else, be anything else.

Because the truth was, he wanted to hurt someone – Mike Barnes, that Silver guy. More than either of them, though, he wanted to hurt Sensei. He wanted to hurt him and ask, is this what you imagined it would be like? Am I?

Johnny rolled onto his back and shut his itchy eyes. He considered the way his limbs were sinking into the mattress and he thought about getting up, grabbing the telephone. Maybe Daniel's temper had faded enough and they could talk. He didn't know what he would say, but when did he ever.

The thing was, if Johnny was the same guy he'd always been, that guy was still someone Daniel apparently liked. That had to mean something. He just needed to cool off, and he'd see that, he'd remember.

Minutes passed, and Johnny didn't get up for the telephone. He fell asleep instead.

Daniel vs Aftershocks

Daniel gritted his teeth and hissed in a long breath. Mr. Miyagi dropped another pellet of glass into the dish at his elbow, and he glanced down at it automatically, taking in the red-tinged scattering of shards there.

“That all of it?” he asked, not very hopeful.

“No,” said Mr. Miyagi and he adjusted his light and bent with the tweezers again.

Daniel was sitting hunched on a stool, stripped down to the traitor-white trousers of the Cobra Kai gi and shivering with misery and anger and a slight chill, because somehow he'd already adjusted back to California's temperatures and fifty degrees now registered as cold.

How was he supposed to rely on anything as a solid truth when everything was always shifting, that was what he wanted to know. Fifty degrees in Jersey would be just fine. Then again, in Jersey he'd likely not be sitting around without a shirt on: so the fallacy of subjective experience rested again at his doorstep. Great. Maybe he should just stop expecting anything to work out, and then he'd stop being disappointed. Who was he to expect good things, anyway.

“Daniel-san very lucky,” said Mr. Miyagi, noticing the new tension in his shoulders.

“Yeah,” said Daniel, turning his head to talk back to the man, “yeah, that's what I feel right now: lucky. Lucky me. Someone I thought was a friend wants to – actually, I don't know what that guy wants? It was kind of unclear, or maybe I was just distracted by his massive betrayal and suddenly creepy attitude. But yeah, lucky me. Down a friend, still have to do that damn tournament, and now Johnny—”

He stopped talking. He bit his tongue and shifted on the stool and ducked his head.

Mr. Miyagi dropped the tweezers in the dish with a little *plink* and walked over to the sink to lift the second, larger bowl waiting there. He returned to Daniel and said, “Daniel-san lucky – cuts minor. Glass not too bad.”

He picked up Daniel's right hand and considered the raw, broken skin

of his knuckles, and Daniel couldn't look at him then. He felt prickly and ashamed and didn't trust himself not to say something stupid. When he looked at his knuckles, he thought of Kreese's bleeding hands from a year ago. It was a far cry from honking someone's nose.

The older man carefully dipped a cloth into the bowl of warm water and started dabbing at Daniel's hand.

Daniel's throat went horrifically tight. He clenched his jaw, tightened his shoulders, and bore through it.

The very idea that Mr. Miyagi had to spend his night helping him like this, when he was already doing so much for Daniel, it wasn't right. And now Daniel had to waste more of the man's time training for a tournament when they should both be focused on making sure the shop opened on time and on budget.

He thought of how important and impressive the tournament had felt when he first came back to California, and he wanted to hide his face forever. What a joke, god, he was such an endless joke of a person.

If you just weren't so fucking weird—

He'd really drawn all of this, hadn't he?

“Mr. Miyagi, I'm sorry,” he whispered to the floor.

The man paused, cloth resting in the bowl: faint tendrils of pink collapsing and diffusing through the warm water. Daniel didn't dare look up, though part of him wanted nothing more in the world than to do so.

“Not boy's fault,” he said over his bowed head. And when Daniel started to shake his head, Mr. Miyagi raised his dry hand and lightly rapped it.

Daniel glanced up reflexively, and Mr. Miyagi caught his eyes immediately, knowing.

“Not winner's fault if loser sore,” he said. “If anything – man who make wager in first place.”

It took Daniel a few seconds to work out what he meant. Then he sat bolt upright, never mind the pull of the cuts on his neck and back.

“Are you kidding me?” he demanded. “None of this is your fault –

you've done nothing but help me," and he realized about the same time as Mr. Miyagi did that his voice sounded really weird. Mr. Miyagi was already shushing him even as Daniel tried to slow his words, but all the same it still poured out in panicked ramble:

"I mean, hell, you've given me *everything*, what are you even talking about. If it wasn't for you, I'd be toast, Mr. Miyagi. Toast. And I'm not just talking about the bullying. You're my best friend, and I don't know what life would be like if I hadn't met you, so don't you start thinking anything stupid about, about—"

("Why the fuck would a guy like that be your friend, Daniel?")

But then he got a look at Mr. Miyagi's face and realized in a crashing horror that precisely nothing he was saying was making the man feel better; in fact, he was doing a bang-up job of making him feel a lot worse. So Daniel shut up. Spigot: off.

He slumped on the stool again.

"I'm sorry," he said, again.

Mr. Miyagi picked up the cloth again and said, *again*, "Not boy's fault."

Johnny vs Miyagi in the Middle

He crossed the now-familiar train tracks and parked on the street outside the tree shop. No one else was around; the street was dead, as usual – maybe deader than usual? This was a terrible neighborhood for a shop. Maybe Johnny should've pressed the point harder when Daniel first showed him the place. He'd gotten distracted, and that was probably Daniel's fault, but it was no excuse.

Johnny cut the engine and climbed out of the Avanti. He took the steps in front of the shop in a single jump and then stood fidgeting stupidly before the door, licking his lips. Trying to psych himself up.

He'd tried earlier to think of something to say, but everything he came up with sounded like the beginning of an argument, and he didn't want to argue. So he'd given up. He was kind of counting on things just sort of falling back into place when they saw each other again. Not like it was all forgiven or over or anything but – maybe just an acknowledgement that none of it mattered as much in the long run as the two of them together. Or something stupid like that.

Daniel wasn't supposed to be able to stay angry with him; Johnny hadn't woken up angry, so he didn't think Daniel should be either. It just didn't make sense.

Johnny cleared his throat a little, stuck his spare fist in his jacket pocket, and opened the door of the shop.

Or tried too, anyway. He frowned down at the stuck knob, trying to twist it. It was locked?

Feeling kind of stupid, he knocked on the door and waited. He imagined he heard the inside wood flooring creak and groan, and then the door opened, and Mr. Miyagi looked out at him impassively.

“Um,” he hadn't considered this possibility, “hi,” the man had to know everything, surely, because Daniel didn't hide much from him, and if Daniel was still angry when he'd arrived home the night before he definitely wouldn't hide *anything* from him, “I was wondering if, you know,” and Johnny shrugged and put his other hand in his jacket pocket before finishing a little lamely, “is he here?”

“Is that Johnny?” shouted Daniel from the depths of the shop. “Tell him I'm *busy*.”

Johnny's eyes flicked automatically, pointlessly, into the shadows over Mr. Miyagi's shoulder. He looked back at the man, who said:

“Daniel-san upset.”

“Right,” said Johnny. He shifted back on his heels, but he was reluctant to give up so quick. He glanced at the street and back at the man and said, pitching his voice low, “Look, you know I'm just trying to defend him, right?”

Mr. Miyagi gave what might've been a half-nod, but then he paused and inspected Johnny, who tried not to shift restlessly on his feet.

“So that why Lawrence-san fight?” he asked, eyes sharp.

And just like before, Johnny didn't know how to answer. The obvious response – *yeah, of course* – felt inadequate.

“Does it really matter?” he asked finally, uneasy. “If Daniel doesn't have to fight that guy, if he doesn't get hurt – what does it matter?”

Mr. Miyagi braced his hand on the door frame and looked up at him, considering. “Matter to Miyagi? Not Miyagi's business. Daniel-san,” and he made an equivocating gesture before pinning him with a look. “Should matter to Lawrence-san. Should matter most – always know why fight.”

“Well, I do,” insisted Johnny. And then he got annoyed about the whole scene and pitched his voice louder to say over the man's shoulder, “So please tell him, I can't *wait* to fight.”

Mr. Miyagi sighed.

Daniel vs Miyagi in the Middle

Daniel's mouth fell open as Mr. Miyagi shut the door and turned back to the room. “Did he seriously just—”

And he crossed quickly to the window and poked his head over the sill. He stared down at the Avanti pulling away from the curb. Johnny was nothing but a forward-facing stoic profile, a blur of terse movements and whipping blond hair, and then he was gone.

“I can't believe it,” said Daniel in disbelief. “He left. Just like that.”

He turned back to the worktable, disappointment feeding his anger. His mouth twisted and he snatched up a pair of clippers, but Miyagi's hand forestalled his work. He looked up at him.

“Don't blame tree for troubles,” he said.

Daniel sighed and put the clippers back down. He said again, “I can't believe he just left.”

“If Daniel-san chase away, can't be surprised when boy run.”

Oh, so you're taking his side now? Daniel didn't say, because even in the depths of his current mood he recognized that was unfair. Being forced to be so reasonable only made him feel worse, though. He rubbed his forehead, agitated.

“I wasn't chasing him away,” he said. “I was – *communicating* my *displeasure*. What a person's supposed to do then is, he's supposed to try harder. He's not supposed to shrug and go, oh, okay then. Guess I'll just leave! Like, what am I supposed to do with that?”

Mr. Miyagi unhooked his glasses from his collar and placed them on his nose. He turned his attention back to the tree in front of him and studied it, saying only, “Maybe Lawrence-san thought, sometime people need space.”

“That's not what Johnny thought,” said Daniel, because get real, this was the guy who pestered Ali on the beach about wanting to *talk* because he saw her chatting with Daniel. And if it did weird things to Daniel's head to think back on that, and that version of his boyfriend, well. That also didn't improve his mood any.

(What, he didn't rate the same amount of effort as a girl? He was being ridiculous. He knew this.)

(What did Johnny think he was going to do? Did he seriously think he could hang back for a while and Daniel was just going to forget everything? Did he think Daniel had *massive memory problems?* All this time Daniel thought they had an understanding about last year; what did it mean now to realize that Daniel's forgiveness might have been read as mere forgetfulness – or worse, carelessness. Maybe that was why Johnny didn't trust him to handle the tournament. He thought Daniel easy, soft.)

Mr. Miyagi made a slight noise. “Well, we not know what boy thought – Daniel-san sent him away.”

“Oh, so you're taking his side now?” said Daniel, distractedly tetchy.

Mr. Miyagi sighed.

Johnny vs Focus

He woke to his first alarm.

The night before, bored and trying to distract himself from the enduring silence of the phone in the other room, he'd hauled his blinds open and dragged his bed three feet to the right, to where he was pretty sure the earliest morning light would hit. Miracle of miracles, this actually worked.

He turned off the alarm five seconds after it started ringing and dragged himself up to sitting before he could think better of it.

He swung his legs off the bed. He rolled his head around his neck a couple times, blinking his eyes wide. His gaze fell on the floorboards of the opposite wall and his resolve hardened and pushed him off the edge of the mattress.

He settled into a plank position on the floor, fixed his eyes forward, and lowered himself. His sleep fog lifted, his thoughts cleared, and he breathed in and out at an even, measured pace. His body was a smoothly-functioning machine, muscles tensing and releasing where they should, obedient. He wasn't a guy with problems, he wasn't lacking anything. His goals were defined, the path to them clear. He was complete and whole and could also switch to resting on his knuckles with no problem.

The next several minutes passed in the relieving swell and ebb of exertion.

His second alarm went off. It was in the far corner, as far from the bed as he could place it, because he'd thought getting physically out of bed would work as a last resort. It felt good to have not needed it.

He was just reaching to turn the alarm off when his bedroom door opened.

Laura did a small double-take and looked down at him in surprise. “Oh. You're up.”

Johnny settled into a butterfly stretch. “Yep.” He played it cool, like he did this every day.

Laura looked around the room, in sleepy bemusement. “Okay,” she

said. She wrapped her robe around herself and nodded. “...Right.”

“Morning!” he called after her as she turned back towards her own bedroom.

Daniel vs Focus

He was tired, practically nodding off where he stood in the center of his room late at night. But despite this, despite the aches in his body from training with Mr. Miyagi earlier and the warning pull of his healing skin, Daniel did kata.

There had been no second attempt at a visit that day, and the phone in the other building never rang, but Daniel did kata and for a brief time he was not:

waiting,
expecting,
bracing,
regretting,
fuming,
worrying, or

longing.

He was just himself, the person who persisted beyond the reach of those feelings. A living body, centered and balanced and breathing through one moment to the next, stepping constantly into the future and sure of what he'll find there because, after all, he knew the forms.

He came to the end and breathed it all out. He blinked around his room. He checked the time. He listened. Nothing.

Body heavy and dragging, he reset to the first position and began again.

Johnny vs Defining an Absence

The worst of it was how familiar it all felt. He woke up in the morning and worked out; he thought about the day ahead and saw only the fight. The road was the same but guard rails had sprung up along either side like he was going over a mountain pass. Even with the destination clear ahead and unchanged, the feeling was different: bound and confined.

He trained and sparred with his friends, and every time he laid one of them out on the mat, he straightened up and felt himself sinking back into his role.

“You're hesitating,” said Tommy. “You could've ended the match two moves ago with the front kick.”

Johnny thought about that as Jim climbed back to his feet, rubbing his shoulder.

“Yeah, you're right,” he said.

Since Daniel came back to California, there would be these moments where it all became almost too much for Johnny. He'd look at the other boy, or consider the feeling of him under his arm or the weight of his hand in Johnny's hair, and suddenly it was like he became too aware or something – of himself, or them: this particular moment in time and how he wouldn't be able to keep it no matter how hard he tried, because that wasn't how life worked.

Seemed everything became a memory so quick. He'd start feeling around the edges and get a faint sense that life might just be a collection of moments already past, events he could no longer do anything about.

“How's Daniel?” Laura asked him one morning. She was sitting at the kitchen table, nursing a cup of coffee. She watched Johnny lace up his running shoes.

“He's fine,” he said, because he probably was for the moment; he had his sensei. And he would be after the tournament, because he had Johnny. Even if he didn't want him.

“It's only,” she said carefully, tapping a nail on the ceramic of her mug, “I've noticed the phone is pretty free at night lately. Did you two

decide to give my phone bill a break or something?"

He straightened up and shook out his shoulders. "I thought Sid was still paying the bills."

"Johnny."

"It's fine," he insisted, already heading for the door.

"*Johnny—*"

Around the house he jogged; past the Avanti in the driveway; he took a right and started up the hill, lengthening his stride to account for the elevation gain. He put his head up and shoulders back and let the December air fill his lungs. Overhead, striations of blue peeked through the overcast winter sky.

It wasn't the same as last year, not completely. This year he knew what he was fighting for, and who. Regardless of what happened, he would have that. Knowledge wasn't like memory: once you had it, it was always there. Forever.

He wondered if he knew Daniel enough for that to count, afterwards.

Daniel vs Defining an Absence

The worst of it was how it was nothing at all like the year before. In the raw materials, it might look the same: he had Mr. Miyagi, and the whole world was their dojo. They trained in the garden and on the coast, on ridges overlooking miles of green persevering through the smog of Southern California. But it didn't matter what was in front of him, Daniel kept wanting to look over his shoulder for a person who stubbornly wasn't there.

“When I get that trophy, think I'm going to throw it in the ocean,” he told Mr. Miyagi one afternoon, collapsing back panting in the grass.

“No, no,” he said over him. “Never throw what might be useful someday. Trophy make good paperweight, perhaps.”

Unwillingly, Daniel's mouth curled up on one side. He sighed and rolled his head along the lawn to stare up at the mostly overcast sky. “Bit bulky for a paperweight,” he pointed out eventually. “A rock would be better.”

“Trellis for bush bean, then. Many possibilities. Daniel-san creative.”

He thought maybe Mr. Miyagi was talking him up a little there. If Daniel was so creative, then why couldn't he picture any way for all this to end well?

It felt so easy, before. He'd spent hours in Parsippany thinking about what he was going to do when he got back here, and most of those activities involved Johnny. And once back here even, at night and in the early mornings, he daydreamed about the stupidest things. Every mundane task had felt exciting and different when pictured with Johnny beside him – a job search, shopping for clothing, a half-formed notion to try surfing. He couldn't wait to live.

The tournament felt like the opposite of living: it felt like an ending. Of what, Daniel didn't know, and he didn't really want to find out but he didn't have much of a choice. Terry had made sure of that. Terry and his damned world.

Daniel's breathing gradually returned to its baseline. He supposed it was time to get up and go again, even if Mr. Miyagi hadn't said so – Mr. Miyagi probably wouldn't ever say so, because he was being careful with Daniel, or something.

Daniel tucked his chin and looked up at the waiting man. “What are we going to do with all the bonsai in the spring? We don't keep trimming them, right?”

“Daniel-san correct,” said Mr. Miyagi, and he extended a hand to help him stand; Daniel took it and swung up. “In spring, bonsai start growing again, and we see what our choices bring.”

Johnny vs What Others Were Saying

So Johnny trained every day, however he could. During the week he spent hours driving to three different campuses. At Jim and Bobby's schools, he kicked ass on a quad near pretty college girls sitting on spread-out blankets: looking up curiously from their spread-out textbooks.

At Tommy's school they used one of the training rooms in the rec center. It was fine. Tommy had really talked it up months back, but all Johnny saw was a room used by everybody for everything. There was no intent, no focus. The schedule on the wall said there was a dance class in the afternoon.

The weekend was better. On the weekend, they all went to Dutch's gym and trained among fighters.

They'd been there for two hours when Johnny overheard the guys talking about him on his way back from taking a leak. It was a Sunday; the tournament was a week and a half away. It had been a week since he saw Daniel, or talked to him. Time was weird.

“...think he's sleeping.” Bobby.

“It's like last year all over again, guy's a total mess.” Dutch.

Johnny paused at the corner of the hallway. He set his back against the wall and put his eyes on the ceiling. He listened.

“I can think of one or two, uh, important differences,” said Jim, diplomatic.

“Yeah, now instead of fucking with LaRusso, he's just fucking him.”

This drew a noise of deep disgust from Tommy, which still made Johnny's stomach twist. “God, can we have a single day where we don't talk about it? Can we do that? *One* day where I'm not forced to remember all that shit?”

“I agree that I don't think we should be talking about it,” said Bobby levelly.

“You're the one who brought it up!”

“*I* brought up his state of mind.”

“State of mind, state of dick – same thing,” said Dutch dismissively.

“Maybe LaRusso's just bad for him, big shocker,” said Tommy, and Johnny's hands clenched hard with the urge to hit something.

“You know,” said Dutch, “for someone who doesn't want to talk about it, you seem to want to really *talk* about it.”

By the time Johnny finally kicked off the wall and rounded the corner, the two had descended into wrestling on the mat. He silently helped Bobby pull them apart and then ordered, like he hadn't heard any of it:

“Alright – Bobby, Jim. Let's go.”

Dutch and Tommy rolled to the edges of the mat; Dutch tonguing his lip and Tommy rotating his elbow, checking it over for full movement. Bobby and Jim stepped forward and faced off. Bobby bowed. But Jim hesitated.

“Jim?” asked Johnny, alert.

Jim licked his lips, eyes flickering around between them all. He said in a rush, “I'm not going to fight in the tournament.” Johnny waited and he shifted on his feet. “Look, I'm – I'm happy to train with you guys, and I want to be there for you, Johnny. I really do, okay? But I don't want to fight anymore.”

No one said anything, and Jim read into the silence, swallowing a couple times and shuffling in place.

He added, “I mean, look, it's not like I was ever as good as you guys anyway.”

Christ, Jimmy muttered Dutch at last, and he shook his head and looked away across the gym, mouth curling a little bitterly. Tommy and Bobby only looked to Johnny, who said finally:

“That's okay.” And when Jim nodded a little jerkily and looked down at his feet, he said, "Jim." He waited until he looked up and met his eyes uncertainly, and he said deliberately, “You're still one of us, man.”

Johnny cleared his throat and stepped forward to place his hand between the two fighters. He looked between them. “Okay, ready?”

Daniel vs What Mothers Were Saying

He thought he was doing a pretty good job of acting normal on the phone with his mother. He steered the conversation clear of anything karate-related, talked a lot about the shop and asked Lucille a lot of questions about her job and her apparent burgeoning feud with City of Fresno parking enforcement – maybe too many questions? Maybe that's where he made his critical error.

“Are you and Johnny fighting?” she asked him, interrupting his forced musings about the nature of meter maid souls.

He broke off, badly startled. “Are – what?”

She repeated the question, even though he didn't actually need her to, since the first round was still ricocheting around the inside of his skull.

“Why would you ask that?” he demanded. Across the room, Mr. Miyagi looked up from the table where he was writing a letter to Yukie. Daniel waved him off and quickly turned around.

“Laura said she thought—”

“*Laura*? You mean you and Johnny's mom talk? You talk now?” He thought about that. "Why?"

“Oh, is that not allowed?” said Lucille dryly. Daniel made a face at the wall. She continued, “Anyway, care to answer the question?”

“Can I plead the fifth?”

Her voice dropped all amusement. “Daniel, what's going on?”

“Nothing. Nothing's going on. It's not a big deal, it's just,” and he thought fast, plucking out the worst of the details, fluffing up the inconsequential ones. Look over here, ma, pay no attention to the man behind the curtain.... “I've decided to defend my title at the All Valley next week. And – he's kinda pissed about it.”

“You're *fighting*? Oh Daniel, you got so hurt last time—”

“It's just one match,” he said quickly. “I mean it's practically just a formality.” He could feel Mr. Miyagi's judgment radiating strongly at his back and he jiggled his leg restlessly. “Or, you know. Like an

exhibition match or something. Crowds just can't get enough of that crane kick, lemme tell you. You know I've seen kids down at the park in Reseda—”

“So Johnny's upset with you,” said Lucille. “Was Johnny going to fight too?”

That was a tricky one. But it didn't matter how mad Daniel was with Johnny – he wasn't a snitch. If Lucille and Laura were talking, and Laura didn't know what was going on, well. That was Johnny's decision.

“Johnny and the All Valley, they're not really – it's not a good combination, I don't think,” he said. “So I don't think – I mean he had a rough time of it last year, so.” There, that was okay. A perfectly serviceable non-answer.

“Oh, he had a rough time of it, did he,” said Lucille tartly.

Daniel bristled. “Yeah, actually, he *did* – I mean, christ, his sensei attacked him in the freaking parking lot afterwards, Mr. Miyagi had to step in and deal with it.”

Too late, he bit his tongue. *Shit!* he mouthed at the wall. He slapped a hand over the back of his head and cringed. *Shit fuck shit!*

Maybe she wouldn't notice?

“He did what?" she shouted. "Daniel, what exactly happened? Does Laura know about this?”

He anxiously wheeled around in place, the coiled cord wrapping around his body like the straitjacket he was going to need when this was all over. Mr. Miyagi was shaking his head down at his letter; yeah, yeah, easy to judge a guy's performance from a bench seat, Mr. Miyagi!

“*God*, ma," he said, despairing. "She probably does, okay. They're real close, I mean he tells her everything.”

It's not every son that would call from two thousand miles away and admit he's a queer over the phone, he didn't add. For one, it made him look like a jerk in comparison. For two, thinking about it made him sad.

“Uh huh. You know,” she said, and she was using that tone, the tone

that instinctively made him shut his eyes, “it's funny what your son can get up to – you think he tells you everything and then his karate teacher calls from Canoga Park one day and asks, *where's Danielsahn?* and suddenly you realize—”

“Ma,” he said loudly. “Come on.”

Johnny vs Delivering a Warning

Johnny was on his bed, flipping through a car magazine without really taking in any of the pictures or words, when Laura poked her head into his room and said Daniel was on the phone.

He immediately threw the magazine aside and sat up. “He is?” He looked around the room for some reason, like maybe Daniel was about to materialize in front of him. “I mean – uh, okay.”

She brought the phone into the room and set it on the bed at his feet before handing him the handset. “Is everything okay? He sounded really strange.”

Johnny gripped the handset with numb-clumsy fingers, acutely aware that Daniel was waiting for him. He shrugged a little and said, “Yeah, everything's fine.” Because maybe it would be now.

Laura shook her head but put her hands up, miming defeat. She left the door cracked for the cord when she left the room.

Johnny cleared his throat quietly, not wanting the other end of the line to pick the sound up. He blinked rapidly and slowly brought the handset up to his ear.

“Hello,” he said, and he thought his voice sounded normal, maybe.

“Hey,” said Daniel. He sounded the same, that voice that was surprisingly deeper than Johnny's own.

Johnny pressed the phone closer to his ear. “Hi.”

Daniel paused. “So, uh – how you been?”

What a stupid fucking question. He ate food without tasting it and spent most nights working out until he thought he could fall asleep, and it only worked half the time. He felt like his heart had been torn out of his chest and put into a blender and then dumped into the garbage disposal for good measure; and then he'd tried to stick his hand down the garbage disposal to get it back but forgot to turn it off first, and now he had a mangled hand too. He hadn't jerked off in ages.

“Fine, I guess,” said Johnny.

“Right,” said Daniel, with heavy emphasis. “Yeah, me too. Oh yeah. I'm doing just fine and dandy over here. I ever tell you how much I love this time of year? The carols and lights, all the warm and fuzzy feelings flowing around through everyone, not like it's all a reminder or anything if you're not doing so hot yourself. Not that I'm not, of course. I'm doing. Just. Fine.”

Johnny's hand nearly cracked the handset. He gritted out, “You asked, man.”

Daniel sighed. “Yeah, I did,” he said quietly. “Sorry. Stupid question.”

Johnny said nothing.

There were a million things he could say: why did you call or, are you still mad. He could ask him if he wanted to come over, maybe. He could ask him if they were still together. If Daniel said no, he could beg.

“You still uh,” began Daniel, and his tone gave it away.

“Yeah.”

On came lecture mode. “It's not a good idea, you know. I mean – it's a really bad idea, Johnny. You don't have to do this.”

Johnny said nothing.

“You could just let it go,” said Daniel in a rush, and for some reason he sounded almost hopeful. That was the worst part. Moron. “You could just change your mind. People change their minds every day. You could walk away from all of it, and then, then we could—”

“I could watch you face off against Barnes with my old sensei gloating from the edge of the mat,” finished Johnny.

Daniel stopped talking.

“Maybe I could buy you chocolates from the hospital gift shop,” he continued flatly. “Bring them up to your bedside? Sounds like a great way to spend your birthday, exactly what I pictured us doing.”

He bought a tent for him a couple weeks ago: had been looking over campground maps in the Sequoia National Forest and carefully thinking up dumb redwood bonsai jokes.

“Wow, the hospital, huh,” said Daniel. “I see my diagnosis has gotten

a lot more serious. Gee, why didn't the doctor call me?”

“You don't know what I know about how Kreese trains his students,” he said harshly, nerves stinging as he realized: christ, he still doesn't get it. How can he not get it. "What he trains them to do."

Daniel's tone turned hot with anger: “I know well enough, since *I fought all of them last year*.”

“Not Jimmy,” said Johnny.

“Oh for fuck's sake, Johnny. You know I didn't even know that guy's name until like a month ago?"

He shut his eyes and curled forward over his lap, rubbing his face with his free hand. Ten minutes ago, he would've sworn on the Avanti he would feel better if he could just hear his voice. Now he felt worse; there were no easy fixes, no security blanket.

"Why did you call?" he asked, and it came out almost in a whisper.

Daniel vs Delivering a Warning

Daniel usually loved talking to Johnny on the phone, almost as much as he loved being with him in person. There was a certain quality his voice got – part of that was just the nature of the line, of course, but it was more than that. Johnny sounded different when he knew Daniel couldn't see him. So even when he invariably said not-a-lot, it still felt like he was saying everything.

Just then, he was saying he felt broken.

Daniel slumped against the frame of the open back door of the house and slowly slid down so he was sitting with his knees to his chest. He pressed the handset to his ear until it hurt, because it felt like it should hurt. He could hear Johnny's soft breathing on the other end.

“I called because,” and he should've called earlier, he was realizing in horror; he should've listened to Mr. Miyagi's hints and talked to him days ago, “well, because – I messed up, kinda.”

“What?” said Johnny, confused. “How? I mean, yeah, you did. But how?”

And Daniel was going to leave that. He tapped his knee and tried to choose his words carefully. “I was talking to my mother, and I – I swear, I don't know how it happened. But last year came up, and I accidentally mentioned.” He stopped, because it felt different, saying it aloud to Johnny than it had to her. He bit his lip and tucked his chin to his chest. “The parking lot, after. Kreese hurting you.”

Johnny said nothing.

Daniel rushed on. “And I didn't – I didn't mean to, and I didn't realize I'd done it until it was out, and then she was asking me all these *questions,* and she asked if your mom knew, and I had no idea but I begged her not to say anything just in case. And then she gave me this ridiculous lecture about how we're just kids and your mom has a right to know about this kind of thing, and she wouldn't *listen* to me, it was so—”

“She said she was gonna tell my mom?” asked Johnny. He was very quiet.

He shouldn't have called him, Daniel thought numbly. He should've

driven over and told him to his face, so he could hold him during or after, or if he was mad: at least sit outside his closed bedroom door like the dog he was. This was such a terrible idea, he was such a coward.

“I just wanted to give you a heads up,” he said.

“Right,” he said distantly. “Thanks.”

His stomach twisted. “Johnny, I'm sorry.”

But he'd already hung up.

It took him a minute or two to loosen his grip and take his hand off the phone. He knew he should carry it into the other room, put it back on it's official-unofficial pedestal next to the lounge chairs. He left it on the bed and stood up.

He thought about the future. When that seemed impossible, he tried thinking about the next week. Another nonstarter: everything would be different. He considered the next few hours. They felt like a dark, winding tunnel. He couldn't picture the other end.

Maybe he could leave her a note and go train in Winnetka. *DEAR MOM...* or, no. She'd probably panic at being addressed and call the police, put out a missing person search. And anyway, what would he even say? Maybe it would be easier as a bullet list.

MOM, HERE ARE SOME UPDATES ABOUT MY LIFE:

**SENSEI KREESE IS ALIVE*

**LAST YEAR IN THE PARKING LOT OF THE ALL VALLEY ARENA AFTER THE TOURNAMENT, KREESE EXECUTED WHAT IS KNOWN AS A REAR NAKED CHOKEHOLD. THIS IS DONE BY PLACING YOUR RIGHT ARM AROUND THE NECK OF YOUR OPPONENT. MAKE SURE HIS TRACHEA SITS AT YOUR ELBOW. PRESSURE IS THEN APPLIED. THIS CUTS THE BLOOD FLOW TO THE BRAIN. I LIKELY WOULD HAVE ONLY PASSED OUT. HE DIDN'T BRING HIS ELBOWS TOGETHER ENOUGH TO ACTUALLY KILL ME.*

**ALSO, I'M FIGHTING IN THIS YEAR'S TOURNAMENT*

Because at this point, he might as well say everything. Maybe she'll even focus on the last and ignore the rest? He couldn't make himself believe it even for the length of the journey from his room to the kitchen.

Laura glanced up when he edged into the room. She tried a smile on him, though she looked worried. She always looked so worried about him now. He hated that.

“How's Daniel?” she asked with false cheer.

“He's – fine, I don't know. Don't care,” he said, distracted. “Look. I

should tell you something."

Horrifically, Laura immediately sat down for it.

"You have to promise not to overreact," he said, and he swore she went dead white.

"Oh, jesus, Johnny," she said, leaning forward and stretching out her hand along the table towards him, beckoning with her fingers. "What is it, what's wrong?"

He reluctantly approached and dragged out the second chair from the table. He sat.

"I'm fine," he said, and then he said the rest.

Johnny & Baby, Why Didn't You Say Anything

I don't know.

I thought I deserved it. I told you, I was a real piece of shit back then. It just felt like like one more thing to throw on the pile. One last part of a shitty semester, and – and I guess I was embarrassed.

(It's embarrassing. Someone hurting you is embarrassing.)

I thought he was proud of me. I thought he cared about me. When I realized that wasn't true, that I'd just made it all up in my head – I don't know, I didn't know what to do. Except hide and pretend I'd never believed any of it in the first place.

(Because it was embarrassing.)

Johnny vs Minor Details

“Wait, wait,” said Laura, her chin shifting over the crown of his head. She pulled back a couple inches and dragged his hair over his forehead to look into his eyes. They were mostly dry now, though he still wanted to avoid her gaze. The whole top of his face felt stiff and itchy.

They should get off the floor, he thought.

“Wait,” she said again. “Did you say Kreese was alive?”

Johnny vs Knowing His Strengths

“Jesus,” said Johnny, already stepping forward to pull them apart again. This shit again. “No, Tommy – c'mon. Look, just – come over here a moment, will you?”

“Dutch started it, why am I getting pulled aside by *Teacher*?” he demanded, but he shrugged off Johnny's hand and followed him to the other side of the room. Behind them, Bobby and Jim started critiquing Dutch's technique.

“He always starts it, and you always rise to it,” said Johnny.

Tommy gave him a disbelieving look. “You're going to lecture me about my temper now? You?”

Johnny folded his arms and tried to be patient; it was easier than he thought it would be, mostly because he knew with absolute certainty that he was right.

“Think back to every time I've lost my temper in a fight and then ask yourself if that's as good a comeback as you think.” Because Johnny never lost when he kept his cool; Kreese used to try to stoke him up in the early days, before he realized Johnny fought better this way. “This is about a match, not everything outside it. Ignore all that – you gotta ignore Dutch, man. This is how he always gets you.”

Tommy turned in a tight circle. He jabbed a finger across the room. “You hear the shit he says.”

“Yeah, I do – when he's saying it to me. But name the last time he got the better of me on the mat.”

He shook his head, dissatisfied. “I can't just block it out. He's the opponent, I have to pay attention to him. That's how this works.”

Johnny rubbed the back of his neck and considered that. He couldn't wave his hand and magically turn Tommy into himself – christ, he didn't want to – and he had no clue how to explain how he was always able to focus on the mat. If he knew how that worked, he would've been a way better student in school.

Then he had an idea.

“Look, uh,” he said, dropping his arms. “Here, why don't we try

something.”

When Tommy realized what it was, he visibly hesitated – *pussy dance practice*, Kreese had said once, when a student brought in a book that mentioned it – but Johnny showed him the steps and stared him down impassively until he started following along. Together they focused on performing the perfect smooth movement: getting their bodies to deliver accuracy and precision, and allowing the feeling of that in the absence of all else open in their minds.

On the fifth repetition, Johnny asked him, because he thought he saw it on his face, “You feel that? That's your center. Dutch can't touch that shit.”

Tommy's only response was a flickering glance and more steady breathing.

“That felt – different,” he said after ten minutes, when he'd arrived back in the ready position. “Where'd you learn all that?”

“You like that? Daniel showed it to me,” said Johnny, and he turned back to the others.

“What?” he asked Bobby, because he kept looking at Johnny strangely.

“Nothing,” said Bobby. “Just – whatever you were doing over there, it looked like you were pretty good at explaining it.”

Johnny didn't really have any response to make to that; he shrugged at Bobby and ignored the way his expression turned thoughtful, because he had a couple pointers to give Dutch too.

Daniel vs A Conversation Devoutly to be Wished

Daniel exited the hardware store with the coil of garden hose over his shoulder. He walked absently down the sidewalk, head down as he counted the change in his hand, because he was pretty sure he was supposed to have gotten back another quarter.

There was a really expensive car parked behind the truck, a brown convertible. His eyes skipped ahead to the hood: a Rolls Royce in this neighborhood?

Daniel stopped walking and straightened up, heart pounding. He met the eyes of the driver sitting with his arm easy along the back of his seat, and Terry smiled at him.

“Nice car,” he managed after an airless couple seconds. “Incredible what you can get as a trade-in these days.”

Terry's smile only widened. He looked completely different than the guy Daniel thought he knew; everything from his leather jacket to his earring and watch gleamed. It was impressive, the difference clothing could make. Daniel would have to remember that, he thought; how not to dress like a rich prick.

“How's life, Danny?” Terry asked cheerfully.

“What do you want,” he said flatly. Then he thought about the supreme weirdness of the setting and time and his face twisted. He looked around the street. “And how did you always know where I was? Are you *following* me?”

“I pay people to look after my investments,” said Terry blandly, and how had Daniel never noticed he was insane. “It's perfectly routine.”

“Jesus,” said Daniel, and he hurried along towards the truck. He threw the coil of hose into the open bed and dug for the keys in his pocket.

He reached the driver's side when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Terry's long body hop over the side of the convertible. He whirled around, keys jangling in his hand, and landed in a ready position with his arms up.

Terry laughed, “Whoa, watch out there.” He waved his arms like a

kung fu fighter in a B-movie and smirked at him.

“You stay away from me,” said Daniel. He wanted to back up so badly.

Terry's face smoothed over, and his eyes went solemn and soulful. Exactly like they always had before, it was sickening to see the transition. He put his hands up and said in a parody of earnest, “Parley. I'm not here to fight.”

“Then why are you?”

“I just thought we could talk.”

“Why the hell would I talk to you now?” demanded Daniel.

He smiled again. “Oh, Danny, you gotta learn – a conversation costs you nothing. It's the ones you miss, the rooms you're not in, that make you lose out in life.”

Daniel risked stepping out of his fighting stance. He lowered his arms and looked the man over and said, “I think I've had about enough advice from you to last a lifetime, thanks.”

“What do you have to lose?” asked Terry.

How had Daniel not guessed the guy was rich before? There was always more to lose. “I'm not going anywhere alone with you."

“Somewhere in public then." Terry cocked his head like he was searching his memory. He grinned. “I think there's a Mexican restaurant around here, you might remember it?”

Daniel gritted his teeth. His fingers clenched hard around the keys in his hand. In the end, his curiosity and desire for more information outstripped his caution. Everything was already so messed up. What more damage could Terry do?

“I'll follow behind you,” he said at last, and when Terry's mouth widened in satisfaction he nearly changed his mind. He was rough in jerking open the driver door of the truck and he said irately over his shoulder, “And stop calling me Danny.”

Daniel vs Finding His Strength

Terry ordered some fajitas and a tall margarita. Daniel ordered water and stared stonily across the table when the man made an exasperated noise.

“Hey, it's my treat,” he said. “No? Okay, suit yourself.”

Daniel shifted on the booth bench. He couldn't help but glance down at the watch adorning the man's wrist. It was dazzling. “So were you born rich? Do you even a have a job? I'm assuming there's not a lot of money in spying on teenagers.”

Terry sipped his margarita and licked the salt from his top lip. He said confidingly over the top of the glass, “Oh, some things you just do for the love of the hobby.”

“You're pathetic,” he said, shaking his head so the rest of him didn't follow along. “Coming after a bunch of kids like this.”

“I killed kids younger than you in Vietnam,” said Terry, serene. He narrowed his eyes at Daniel with curiosity. “What kind of line I am supposed to have crossed here?”

Daniel didn't move. He didn't blink.

Terry's face creased and released in a wide laugh. “Don't look so alarmed! It was all above aboard – it was war.” The smile snapped off, and his clear eyes shone across the table. “I wouldn't do anything illegal.”

“I don't believe you.”

That got another spark of amusement, but only a spark. “Well, I guess you'll just have to trust my self-restraint.”

This is insane. You're insane. It was so self-evident, there was no point in even saying it. Probably Terry even knew, and the most he would do in response is shrug at Daniel. Shrug and take another sip of his margarita.

“You know, I do see a lot of myself in you,” said Terry.

“You seem to talk a lot,” agreed Daniel. He didn't like how much Terry smiled at him. “Can you get to the point? Why are we here?”

Terry heaved a heavy, theatrical sigh and set his margarita down. He braced his hands on the edge of the table and regarded Daniel seriously: or his version of serious, anyway.

“I hear your boyfriend is planning to fight,” he said.

Daniel's stomach twisted. He said, wooden, “I'm not talking about him with you.”

“You misunderstand my motive,” said Terry. “I don't care about Johnny Lawrence. I care about what he does in the tournament.”

And yeah, Daniel got it, Johnny was an incredible fighter: what a badass, yeah, yeah. It's not like he hadn't ever sat back and watched him move with a deep and abiding appreciation. But *jesus*—

“You know I beat him last year, right? Like, you get that?”

“Why do you think we came after you? What do you think this is all about?”

Daniel said nothing. He sat back in the booth, confused, and as if they were connected by a short string, Terry sat forward to press his point.

“Listen, I'm offering you a deal, here. You don't want him to fight – I don't want him to fight either. I'm a business man at heart, Daniel. I like my bets rigged and my risks insured.”

He shook his head. “What exactly are you asking for?”

“You stop your little boyfriend from entering that tournament – whatever method you prefer, though I have some ideas to offer – and you fight Mike Barnes like you were always supposed to. You'll probably lose, but if you can take the hits and make sure of it, well. There might be tidy sum in it for you.”

Daniel stared at him. Terry looked back unblinking.

“I,” he said, and then he stopped because really, where to begin.

Terry misunderstood the nature of his difficulty. “You wouldn't have to hurt Johnny. There are plenty of ways to take a man out of commission temporarily.”

It took him a few tries to work it out: the twisted seething mass of logic, the contortions of motive and plans. But once he did, it was all surprisingly simple in the end.

“So you think this is what's going to make Kreese happy with you?” he asked. “Just – arrange everything perfectly for him, and that's that?”

Terry's expression hardened. “It's not the kind of thing you leave to chance. People don't just find it on their own.”

Daniel looked down at the table.

“Well?” said Terry with a shade of impatience. “What do you say. Budding businessman like yourself, you'd be stupid to pass this opportunity up. How much money do you think that bonsai shop will really pull in during the first year? It's hard getting a new business off the ground. This would more than cover your expenses while you're finding your footing.”

It was grotesque; Daniel didn't let the thought reach his face.

Terry's cold eyes followed him as he slid out of the booth. “You're being very stupid right now,” he warned. “You realize John taught your boyfriend for years, right? He knows his every weakness, and he's been working with Mike Barnes every day for the past month. I'm offering you both a chance at happiness here. It might be your only chance.”

Daniel thought about Johnny's voice on the phone a few days ago. *You don't know what I know about how Kreese trains his students.* Maybe Johnny knew exactly what he was walking into with the tournament. Maybe Daniel was so busy worrying about him, he'd forgot to listen to him.

“He'll get himself hurt,” said Terry, and his voice said *I promise*. “You let this happen, you're setting him up for a world of pain and disappointment. You think you can live with yourself after that?”

“I think,” said Daniel slowly and not quite steadily, “I trust my Johnny more than you do yours.”

And then somehow he made himself turn his back to the threat and walk away.

Daniel & Finally Making the First Move

He did a lot of thinking in the next couple days. He thought during meals and work, and he thought before and after kata. He thought so much and said so little, Mr. Miyagi started to look a whole new level of concerned; Daniel had to tell him he was okay, or he would be, anyway. Eventually.

Thinking back, maybe it was the lingering burst of confidence that came from having a whole village of people crowded in a gigantic castle cheering for him, but until that first fight in the shop with Terry's hooligans, Daniel had forgotten what it felt like to feel weak. Mixed up with everything going on with Johnny at the time, that feeling had become poisonous.

It made his skin crawl to think about Terry and whatever the hell he had going on with John Kreese, but he thought about it: the layers of desperation and suspicion it would take to make approaching Daniel about the tournament worthwhile. He didn't want to live like that. It was a different type of weakness, a twisted sort of dependence.

He thought it had to mean something that things with Johnny and him were always so easy when they weren't thinking about it, when the world wasn't imposing itself on them. With Johnny, he'd never felt more free.

Daniel didn't remember feeling weak once across the thousands of miles they traveled at the end of summer; even when he was in an actual fight and Johnny took on three guys while he mostly stood back and took potshots because he was a little drunk and the fight seemed kinda messy. Was he weak for that? No, he was smart. Fighting three guys while drunk was a really dumb thing to do. The bottle to the back of Johnny's head was proof enough of that like, hello.

He still didn't want Johnny fighting in that tournament – maybe more than ever, after what Terry had said. But not talking to him wasn't going to change that.

Who was he kidding, talking to him probably wouldn't change it either, for that matter. His shitty failed attempt at a phone call kind of

made that clear. After all, this was the guy who didn't have to be lost to run out of gas; the hierarchy of priorities in that silly golden head defied all logic and reason. End of the day, some things mattered more than others to Johnny, and what mattered most was not being alone.

Question was, what mattered most to Daniel? Being right (and he was right) or being there for someone he loved, no matter what happened (and anyway, he would still be right)?

There were different ways to fight for someone. He thought maybe Johnny needed him, but more to the point – he needed Johnny. It was starting to feel pretty stupid to pretend otherwise.

By mutual agreement, there was no training the day before a tournament, so he and Mr. Miyagi got home early. Daniel waved off his offer of dinner and took the phone up. He dialed the number without hesitating, listened to it ring.

“Hello?” said Johnny from the other side of the valley; the other side of a long tunnel. He sounded wary.

“Johnny?” Daniel took a breath and ducked his head. “Hey, can you come pick me up please?”

Daniel & Trying

He waited outside the fence for Johnny, sitting on the edge of the curb and holding his knees to stop them from jumping restlessly.

He knew the Avanti was coming before he saw her. He knew by the cut of her headlights around the corner, and the way her engine sounded. He stood slowly and let her light spill over him: eyes wide despite how it hurt to look into it.

Johnny slowed and stopped, but he didn't turn off the engine. Daniel stepped over to the passenger door, and they looked at each other over the side of the car.

“Hey, sweetheart,” said Daniel and Johnny's mouth lifted slightly, a tired attempt at a smile to match the tired rest of him. He looked awful.

“Even I don't call her that,” he said.

“Wasn't talking to the car,” said Daniel, and he watched, aching, as Johnny looked away. His mouth slashed downward; Daniel just wanted to hold him. It was dizzying, always, to look and see all the different shades of him: someone so tough and strong but also so terribly exposed. He needed someone to treat him right, and Daniel was trying.

“You getting in or what,” said Johnny to his dashboard. He started a little when Daniel actually opened the door. His hand on the gear shift twitched, his shoulders stiffened. His eyes traveled around the empty street, it was like he couldn't stand to look at Daniel.

“Where, uh,” he tried thickly, hand clutching the gear shift. “Where do you want to go?”

He nearly flinched when Daniel launched himself across the car and wrapped his arms around his middle. Johnny shivered for a second before he broke. His arms came up around Daniel and he buried his face in his hair.

I don't care where we go, so long as I'm with you, thought Daniel. And then he realized he could actually say that aloud, so he did, and Johnny made a harsh, choked sound and held on tighter. He was maybe going to snap Daniel's ribcage and puncture a lung or two but

hey, Daniel figured there were worse ways to go.

Johnny drove them to the coast. He found a quiet empty spot away from the lights and backed into it so they could sit in the back and look out at the dark ocean. Daniel couldn't quite make out the waves, but he could hear them and it was oddly reassuring: a metronome to the moment.

Daniel wanted to be really careful about everything he said. He wanted to blow Johnny away with how soft and tender and thoughtful he could be, so the other boy was left with absolutely no doubt in his mind how Daniel felt, and he'd feel safe and loved and maybe like he didn't need to fight in the tournament. Daniel felt all this and thought about it, and then for some reason he said:

“Did you know your sensei and Terry Silver are like, together?”

“*What*?” Johnny twisted around from making the Avanti comfortable for them. He stared at Daniel, who widened his eyes and nodded seriously, and he said, “Gross.”

“I know, right?”

They climbed into the back and arranged themselves. Johnny slung an arm around him and Daniel tucked his head and breathed him in: the smell of his skin a warm comfort against the cool salty breeze.

They didn't say anything for a long time, and at first it was okay because Daniel was so relieved just to be near him again. But eventually everything started edging up in his mind, fidgeting and clamoring. Tomorrow was the tournament and it felt like a cliff.

“You know, last year,” he said quietly, and Johnny's arm tightened around him but Daniel pushed resolutely on, “after Bobby took out my knee? I was lying in that locker room, and I was – I was so mad. I was so terrified of fighting you, but then when I thought I wasn't even going to get the chance, all I felt was mad.”

“You want to talk mad,” said Johnny. “I couldn't believe it when you came limping out on the mat. This fucking kid. That's all I could think.” He turned his head and pressed his lips to the side of Daniel's head. “This fucking kid," he murmured into his temple.

Daniel let his eyes drift mostly closed, so he could visualize it. “I liked

that, actually," he said, almost dreamy. "I could always tell when you were thinking that, and I liked it because it was so much better than when you were laughing at me. That was the worst. Sometimes when you guys were pushing me around, you'd look at me, and it was like," he licked his lips and said quickly, "it was like it was just the funniest fucking thing in the world to you. The idea of me fighting back."

Johnny shifted, uncomfortable. "Yeah, well. I wasn't laughing at the tournament."

"No," agreed Daniel. He opened his eyes and stared out at the dark beach. "Do you think I'm too weak to take on Mike Barnes tomorrow?" he asked calmly, like it didn't mean everything to him.

"What?"

Daniel sighed and sat up, and when Johnny tried to hold on, not wanting to let him go, he turned around and sat astride his lap. He searched Johnny's face and asked clearly:

"Do you think I can beat him?"

Johnny squinted at him, confused. "Maybe you can – and maybe you can't. It's a karate match, that's how it works. But that's not the point."

He cocked his head, appraising. "And what's the point?"

"You don't have to." Johnny's hands dropped to his waist and squeezed. He gave him a shake, and Daniel swayed gamely along, pushing out his mouth mutinously. "Daniel, don't you get it? You beat Kreese, man. You and your sensei. You already won."

Daniel blinked and broke, ducking his head. Johnny lifted a hand to his face, pressed their foreheads together reverently.

"You don't have to prove anything to anyone," he whispered, and maybe Daniel finally believed it.

Johnny vs Why He Fights

Daniel went boneless in his lap with something Johnny thought might be relief. He rotated his face against Johnny's and whispered in his ear – like it was a secret, like it was something that might shock Johnny to his core instead of being a truth so fundamental to Daniel, he wouldn't recognize him any other way:

“I don't want to fight tomorrow.”

A cool wave of relief descended; Johnny felt calmer, like he could suddenly breathe easier. He could take care of this. He could do this for Daniel.

“If I have any say in it,” he said steadily, “you won't have to.”

“Oh? Is the gallant knight fighting for *my* favor?” he asked wryly. “Would you like my handkerchief?”

Gross? “Why would I want your handkerchief?”

He felt Daniel's smile against his cheek. “Never mind.”

Daniel cleared his throat and sat back in his lap, still smiling idling at him. He grabbed Johnny's hands and pulled them forward, playing with his fingers. He looked down, and Johnny wondered what he thought when he looked at his hands: if it was possible to ever completely forget what they'd done in the past.

“You know,” said Daniel softly. “I'd still be a lot happier if you weren't fighting tomorrow. You don't have to prove anything either.”

“That's not true,” said Johnny immediately, and when Daniel sighed, he said quickly, “No, shut up. Daniel, I mean it.”

His expression went flipped from exasperated to quizzical before arriving at curious. “Explain it to me, then,” he said simply.

If I could, don't you think I would've already? But he put his head against the back of the Avanti's front seat and thought about it. Speaking openly about last year still felt wrong: risky, like maybe if he said too much, Daniel might blink and wake up and remember all the reasons he should never have forgiven him. But Daniel had shared something with him, so he thought maybe he should do the same.

“Do – do you remember,” he said, “you said once – last year. You asked me if I ever wondered if Kreese was wrong.”

“I did? I mean, okay. Sure.” Daniel paused. “Did you try to punch my face in?”

“I wanted to,” he said honestly. “It made me really angry, that you could just – *say* something like that, like it was easy for you to say.” Everything is always so easy for you to say, he thought. “And it was just – I couldn't stop thinking about it after. It really messed with my head. There'd always been, you know – he was never an easy teacher. When I did good I thought that really meant something. I think I always knew, I always felt there was something bad there. But I was so good at it. And I didn't want to let go of that. So I got angry instead.”

Daniel studied him. “How is any of that getting fixed by you fighting tomorrow?”

“I never said no to him,” said Johnny. Daniel blinked, and he rushed on: “My mom, when I told her about last year – she said, like. 'You're different now, you walked away from him.' But I didn't – *no*, man, listen.”

Because Daniel was shaking his head and shifting over his lap and generally looking like he wanted to argue, but he wasn't going to argue with Johnny, not about this. He was going to fucking listen, because it was hard enough for Johnny to get out.

“I never said no to him,” he said insistently. “I had my chance, during the tournament, and I *didn't do it.* He told me to sweep your leg, and I did, and – and then you won anyway.” He laughed, and there was a jagged crack in the sound. It still felt like a miracle, after all this time. “And I was so relieved, man. I was so fucking relieved, I felt like I was floating on air. But then he choked me out in front of all my friends and all those people. And yeah, sure, we walked then. Sure. We crawled away from him. But you can't tell me that's the same fucking thing as – you can't—”

Daniel made a sound of soft comfort, shushing him almost. He leaned forward and kissed him to give Johnny an excuse to stop talking, and he gave into it with relief. He kissed him back, and Daniel took all the hardness and made it sweet, just like always. He made Johnny better.

“So you're going to fight,” said Daniel a while later, when they were lying down, arms and legs tangled together against the winter breeze.

“I'm sorry,” said Johnny, because he could hear the worry in his voice. “But it's the only thing I know how to do. And at least this way some good can come out of it.”

“The only thing you know how to do,” repeated Daniel. He made a sound of deep disgust and knocked his head into his shoulder. “Johnny, man, you haven't even tried anything else yet. Like, we're eighteen. You have time to figure it out.”

Johnny blinked and raised his arm to check the time. He dropped it heavily and said to to the sky, “I'm eighteen. You're not.”

Daniel poked his head up and frowned at him. “What?”

“Happy birthday, man," said Johnny, and he kissed him again.

Johnny vs Early Bird Gets the Daniel

“What is that,” croaked Daniel as Johnny reached and turned off his alarm. He raised his head from his pillow and stared muzzily over while Johnny sat up. “No, no, what are you doing,” he complained, and he slung an arm around his lap and tried to pull him back down to the bed, and oh god. It was like being wrestled by a koala.

“Go back to sleep, man,” he said, pushing at his shoulder. “You still have time.”

They'd gotten back to the pool house only four and a half hours ago. It wasn't exactly the smartest way to prepare for a tournament, but he slept better than he thought he would've otherwise, if he was alone. He still felt like he'd been run over by a train.

“We are literally going to the same place,” said Daniel, and it was kind of sick, how quickly he was able to shake off sleep and wake up; his eyes were already clear as he watched Johnny stand and kick off his boxers. Too clear; attentive. Johnny didn't have time for that either.

“Yeah, but I gotta be there early,” said Johnny, and he hoped Daniel would leave it at that.

“Why?” he asked promptly.

Johnny reached for his towel and knotted it around his hips, not answering. He glanced at Daniel, whose eyes narrowed suspiciously, and he glanced quickly away.

“Anyway, I'm going to take a shower and then get going—”

“You drove, remember?” said Daniel, throwing off the blanket and sitting up. “You gotta drop me home, mister.”

Fuck. Every second longer in his company was dangerous. There was no way this was going to end well.

“Wait,” said Daniel slowly, tone going bright with awe and hopeful disbelief. Johnny's stomach dropped in dread. “Wait – do you have to fight in the qualifying round?”

Fuck. Johnny reached for the door. Daniel scrambled off the bed, arms outstretched for him, expression like he'd seen god.

“Oh my god. Ohmygod. Johnny, Johnny, are you gonna have to fight some freshmen? Middle schoolers? Is there an age bracket? Oh, Johnny, my *big strong man*—”

He nearly pulled the door off its hinges in his desperation to escape.

Johnny vs Good Luck, Kid

Laura didn't look like she'd slept much more than them. She stood against the kitchen counter like it was the only thing keeping her upright, and she watched Johnny pack his duffle bag.

“New gi?” she said.

“It's just a plain one,” he said, shrugging. “Doesn't have any of my patches or anything.” But he thought he liked it better this way: it felt more real, like an actual fresh start.

“I think the color suits you,” she said, and she sipped her coffee. Her eyes went past him and she tilted her head. “Oh, hello, Daniel.”

Daniel smiled at her. “Morning,” he said, and he was regulating his volume and everything, like he was trying to be considerate or something.

“Are you fighting in this tournament too?” asked Laura, as if this was all normal, just a regular day in a regular year.

Daniel glanced at Johnny. “Yeah, maybe. You gonna be in the stands, cheering us on?”

“She doesn't watch me fight,” said Johnny to him, voice low.

Laura smiled tightly. “I have some meetings today, some things to take care of. But I'm going to try to make it for the final match.”

There's not going to be a final match, Johnny wanted to say. But if his mom came along once it was all already over, that was fine by him.

He slung the bag over his shoulder. “Alright, gotta go.”

“Johnny.” Laura put her coffee down and raised her arms, beckoning. He stepped forward into the embrace, ducking his head to her shoulder, mouth to the terrycloth of her bathrobe. He breathed in the smell of her hair and focused on the feeling of her hands on his back; for a moment his nerves didn't matter.

She searched his eyes when he drew back. Whatever she saw made her smile again, and her own eyes went a little bright. “I know you're going to do great today," she said firmly.

He just nodded. He didn't know what to say.

He hope she didn't come early. He didn't want her to see him fight.

Johnny vs Qualifying Round

The only person in their dojo who didn't look incredibly embarrassed the whole time was Dutch. He took way too much glee in defeating a thirteen-year-old. Johnny wondered about him sometimes.

Anyway, Johnny was just going to pretend the whole thing never happened.

Johnny vs Dojo Roll Call

The arena looked different than he remembered. It was smaller, maybe. Did they redo the walls?

It wasn't the only difference from last year; Daniel was a lot cuter in his gi than he had been in Johnny's memory. He stood fidgeting next to Mr. Miyagi, and when Johnny risked looking his way across the gym floor, he grinned nervously at him and bounced his eyebrows. He even gave a small dorky wave.

Johnny suppressed a sigh and only shook his head slightly at him. That kid had no game face. It was so embarrassing. He was the reigning champion, and he smiled at almost everyone who looked his way. Where was the intimidation factor? Didn't he understand there was a whole mental component to this thing?

Daniel rolled his eyes and said something to Mr. Miyagi, who nodded absently but not like he was really listening.

Over the speakers, the man said *and a newcomer to the tournament scene, the West Valley Karate Cooperative. That's... an interesting name for a dojo!*

Beside him, Tommy said, “Fucking Jimmy. What a pussy name for a dojo.”

“Blame Dutch,” said Johnny. “He split the vote.”

“It's not that bad,” muttered Dutch from the other side of Tommy, and if they were alone Johnny would have a lot to say about pathetic guys who were completely whipped and not even getting any for the trouble.

“Can we focus up here, please,” said Bobby. "The name doesn't matter. And anyway, we can always change it later."

It felt good to stand shoulder to shoulder with his friends again. Instead of a wall of black they were a stream of blue; and when the announcer called out the name Cobra Kai and he couldn't help but look over to where Kreese was standing, smiling back at him, he thought: this is better. Because you can't break water.

“Okay,” said Jim, hustling up between the mats with his arms full. He

was dressed in his civvies but wearing a sweater the same shade of blue as their gis. “I've got drinks and some snacks – anyone hungry? I bought three different types of granola bars and some fruit here—”

“Oh, dude, gimme an apple,” said Tommy. Jim tossed him one in an easy underhand pitch.

“Yeah, I'm starving,” said Bobby, breaking formation for the sake of a granola bar. “Didn't eat breakfast.”

Johnny's lips tightened. Did no one remember about the game faces?

“Johnny?” asked Jim, passing out the waters and snacks. He glanced at him. “You want anything?”

He didn't sigh as he turned his back on Kreese's satisfied smirk. “Yeah, guess I'll have an orange or something.”

Johnny vs Taking It Seriously

Johnny was standing with his arms folded, watching intently as Bobby bowed to a gangly guy from Kick Lift Karate when Daniel wandered over across the gym. He didn't have to fight until the final match and was clearly very bored. It spelled trouble. Specifically, it spelled trouble for Johnny.

“No,” said Johnny, not looking away from the mat.

“What,” protested Daniel, “I didn't even say anything.”

Johnny only shook his head. Daniel tucked his thumbs into the front of his karate belt and rocked back casually on his heels. They watched Bobby circle the beanpole.

“I think that color really suits you, by the way,” said Daniel, in a confiding undertone. “Don't know when you and the guys took your little shopping trip, but what a bounty! And I love that you went for the sleeveless style again – got the goods, why not display them, that's what I say. I like my gi, of course – it's a got a long and rich history, and it's personally very important to Mr. Miyagi, but hey, if I had to choose a new one—”

“Jesus christ,” said Johnny.

“Okay, okay, hey – just trying to make conversation here.”

He set his teeth. “When I said I was going to make sure you didn't have to fight, I didn't realize you were going to stop taking the whole thing seriously.”

It was the ultimate Daniel LaRusso move: taking Johnny's epic romantic gesture and turning it into a joke.

“Johnny,” said Daniel frankly, “I think I'm trying to take this as seriously as my health permits. See, I did a lot of thinking earlier while you were probably pushing around small children. And I think how one approaches a problem can really change the outcome – if the outcome's bad, I mean. And I'm not saying the outcome here will be bad, of course not. But who knows, you know? So I just started thinking about it, and – I don't know, man. Have *you* really thought about it? We're in a room full of high schoolers, trying to face down your fascistic ex-teacher and his insane gay lover,” and here, fatally,

he spoke just loud enough for Bobby on the mat to overhear; Bobby's head whipped around and he stared at them, gobsmacked. A second later, the beanpole landed a point on his chest.

“Jesus christ,” said Johnny again, fed up.

Daniel winced. “Sorry.”

Johnny vs Pretty Weird

“It's such complete bullshit you don't have to fight until the final match,” Tommy said to Daniel, who was sitting on the first row of bleachers and chewing through one of Jim's granola bars.

“Why does everyone keep saying that to me like I'm the one who made up new rule?” asked Daniel.

Johnny was only half paying attention to them, and that half was pretty unwilling. He couldn't get over the weirdness of having Daniel around his friends; he didn't know who he was more worried about embarrassing him. It was distracting.

The other half of his attention was reserved for a mat across the gym, where Mike Barnes was fighting someone from Locust Valley. Johnny stretched his triceps and watched intently.

Ten seconds into the match, Barnes drove the base of his palm into his opponent's nose. Johnny took an involuntary step forward, attention jumping because – was that it? Was all this going to be over, just like that? Behind Barnes, Kreese waited calmly with his arms folded across his chest. Silver was smiling. Neither looked worried.

The referee waved his arms and shouted something, and the Locust Valley guy stumbled off the mat to where his sensei was already lifting a towel to dab at his face. The smear of blood was visible from across the room.

Johnny switched arms, stretching his left across to his right shoulder. He held his elbow against his chest and waited for the referee to declare the match over and Barnes disqualified.

But the ref didn't throw Barnes out of the match; after half a minute, he reset the fighters and put his hand between them like nothing had happened. Barnes danced in place and put his fists up. He smirked.

“It is pretty weird though, isn't it,” said Daniel behind him, thoughtful and clearly not paying any attention. "I don't think they ever said why they changed the rules."

Barnes won the match.

Johnny vs Warming Up

His first match lasted less than ten seconds. He bowed and was quick and clean, and he bowed again. The whole thing was over in less time than it took to move through half a kata.

When he straightened out of it, he found himself looking into Kreese's eyes.

The man had come over while he was focused on the ref and his opponent. He stood now on the edge of the mat, holding the front of his gi with his thick fists, and he stared Johnny down. There was something like approval in his eyes, or maybe it was just smugness: a proprietary satisfaction that his training had proven itself yet again.

“You know,” said Daniel, stepping up to his side with his hands on his hips. “First time I saw you do that, I remember thinking: wow, I am so screwed. I kept thinking about the speed of it all – 'how am I supposed to do anything in that amount of time?'” He shook his head and smiled up at Johnny. “Of course then I remembered that's the beauty about defensive karate. You might set the pace, but I control the clock.”

Kreese's eyes shifted to Daniel, and his mouth turned hard, deepening at the corners.

Johnny turned away and nudged Daniel's side. His ears were ringing slightly. “Control the clock, huh. You mean you run around the mat a lot, wasting everybody's time.”

“I prefer to think of it as, *you* run around the mat a lot? I just get out of your way.” Daniel walked with him back across the gym.

“Right, right. Sorry, I forgot: Daniel LaRusso will do anything to avoid running.”

“Are you casting doubt on my physical stamina?”

“No.” Johnny frowned and accepted a bottle of water and congratulations from Jim. “That doesn't sound like something I'd do.”

He looked around for the clock on the wall; he had thirty minutes before his next match. This was always the worst part, the waiting. Waiting, and staying warmed up.

As if he has read his mind, Daniel said, low and earnest, “You want to find a warm-up room, I can prove you wrong about that.”

Johnny glanced down at him, distracted. “Wrong about – what? Wait. What?” Was he really suggesting what Daniel was almost certainly always suggesting? Surely not. Not even Daniel would—

But Daniel only gave him an unmistakable look. Without thinking, Johnny reached up and planted a hand over his face and shoved him lightly away. Daniel shrugged it off, sputtering.

“A simple no would've sufficed,” he said, annoyed and tilting his chin like a person who had any dignity.

“I am literally in the middle of a tournament,” said Johnny, incredulous. “I need to focus, Daniel, and you need to stop acting like this is all one big—”

“Not thinking about Kreese anymore though, are you,” said Daniel, and this brought him up short.

He narrowed his eyes and said, “You mean you've been doing this on purpose?”

Daniel shrugged. He made a bratty face, but when he met Johnny's gaze, his eyes were warm and compassionate. He was the worst.

“*Guys*,” said Jim suddenly, standing up from the bleachers behind them.

They looked over to see Bobby limping towards them, assisted by Tommy under his right arm. He was holding a bag of ice to his face.

“What the fuck happened?” demanded Johnny.

“Barnes,” said Bobby, curt from pain. Tommy helped lower him to the bleachers, and his hand went automatically to his ankle, probing.

“Barnes beat you?” said Johnny, feeling dumb with shock.

“Bastard fights dirty,” said Tommy and Bobby nodded in tight agreement. Johnny stared down at him, still not willing to believe it just yet.

“He knew exactly where to hit,” said Bobby quietly, shifting the ice pack down off a burgeoning bruise around his right eye. He dropped it over his ankle and shook his head down at the ground. “Kreese must

have taught him everything, man. All our blindspots and weaknesses."

"This is why we trained together," said Johnny, like he was reminding him.

He nodded wearily and said, "I guess for me, it wasn't enough. I'm sorry."

Johnny blinked. "You've nothing to be sorry about, man. We already knew Kreese was like this. It's why we're here." And then he couldn't help but glance sidelong at Daniel, because it wasn't the only reason they were here.

Daniel stared back at him, dark eyes huge with worry. He was pale and no longer looked like he wanted to crack a joke.

Johnny found he missed it already.

Johnny vs Strategy

“This brings up a good point, though,” said Dutch, once he'd come back from his third match and heard the news about Bobby. “We never discussed it – one of us does fight Barnes and win, what then?”

Johnny and Bobby exchanged nonplussed looks. Bobby shrugged.

“Then we step down,” said Johnny. He couldn't really be bothered to think that far ahead. He still had five possible matches to fight.

Dutch snorted in disbelief. “Yeah, but why should I?” And then he sneered at Daniel, who gave him a distinctly unimpressed look in return. “Maybe I want a rematch with LaRusso here, take home that title myself.”

Johnny straightened up and turned to him with great deliberation.

“Dutch, man,” started Jim, glancing uneasily between him and Johnny.

“You know there are adult tournaments we could be fighting in,” Tommy said to Dutch. “You really want to be known as the guy who took the title the year *after* he graduated high school?”

“It doesn't matter, because you wouldn't take the title anyway. Daniel would win,” said Johnny, because it was probably true but more importantly he was learning the finer points of navigating between Daniel's massive pride and ego. This was a successful strategy: Daniel gave him a very pleased smile, which turned into a very punchable smile the moment he switched it over to Dutch. It might have actually been the same smile the whole time.

Johnny waited for Daniel to turn away before adding in an undertone, “And if he didn't, I'd beat your ass from here to Winnetka for touching him.”

Dutch only shook his head in disgust.

Johnny vs The Unthinkable

Johnny moved through his matches and watched Barnes do the same. Before long, it became clear to all of them that the tournament had been rigged somehow.

“What do we think,” said Tommy, staring as Barnes's latest opponent rolled over onto his side on the mat: crumpled, back heaving. “They bribed the refs?”

Daniel danced restlessly on his feet beside Mr. Miyagi. He glanced at his sensei and then stared at Johnny, who looked away. He was cold and oddly calm, which was weird because he also felt like his air was being constricted. A noose was tightening slowly around them – a noose, or a pair of arms.

"You remember Silver's house," said Jim, anxious. "No one gets that rich without being willing to cheat."

“So how are we supposed to beat him if the refs are paid off?” demanded Dutch.

Johnny shook his head. “All we can do is focus on our blocking, and make sure we don't do anything they could possibly call out as a penalty. But guys, Barnes isn't that good – I beat him once already.”

“You beat him because you took out his knee,” said Bobby quietly behind him. Johnny turned and met his worried gaze. “You think you can still take him under tournament rules?”

“Yeah,” said Johnny after a moment, because he had to: any other outcome was unthinkable. Daniel wasn't getting into that ring. “I do.”

He turned back to the gym and watched as Barnes's defeated opponent slowly pushed up onto his hands and knees, gulping for air. He was crying.

Unthinkable.

Johnny vs (Dutch vs Tommy)

“So,” said Daniel, easing up to Johnny and the others as Dutch and Tommy bowed to each other on the mat. “Are you guys taking bets on who we think is going to win here?”

Bobby shifted on his crutch and glanced quickly at him past Johnny, eyes sharp. Daniel sounded like he was trying very hard to hide his nerves. He was doing a bad job.

“I think the smarter bet might be whether they'll remember there's more tournament after this, and they need to not to take each other out,” said Bobby, deceptively casual.

Daniel's mouth hooked into a slight grin. On the mat, Dutch and Tommy snapped into their fighting stances: eyes locked together, mouths snarling.

“Oh, jesus christ,” said Johnny under his breath. He tightened his arms over his chest and glared at the mat. If these morons—

The ref started the match and Dutch flew across the mat.

This why you got kicked out MAC? asked Dutch, and he threw a punch that was struck down and skidded off Tommy's thigh. *Too pussy to make it with fighters in the real world?*

Tommy twisted around Dutch and kicked him in the backside. *Who was the one happy about fighting a middle schooler, you dick?*

“I'm going to kill them both,” said Johnny and beside him, Bobby grimaced.

He snuck a glance over to where Kreese was watching the fight from across the room, and his face colored in embarrassment. Some dojo they were.

He watched as Dutch gave Tommy a rude gesture and said something he couldn't hear, because the roar of the arena was rushing over his ears like the wind on the freeway, and it was so clear to him then; clear like white lines delineating the boundary between road and ditch —

Johnny stepped forward and barked out, “Stop fucking around! Both of you, get your head in the match!”

They both looked over at him, momentarily shocked out of their bullshit. The next second, Dutch's face went blank and Tommy's went thoughtful. They turned back to each other and circled silently.

“What?” said Johnny as he stepped back again, because Daniel was staring at him oddly. The rush of adrenaline was making it hard to read beyond that. He hoped Daniel didn't think he was being a bully or something; Dutch and Tommy were trained to respond to a certain tone.

“Nothing,” said Daniel. “It's just – Johnny, you sounded kind of like a sensei.”

The rest of the match was carried out in silence, though Dutch never needed words to communicate certain things. It didn't matter, though – Tommy stopped reacting to the faces and taunts. His eyes, usually so wide and frantic in a fight, were narrow and intent.

By the time he won, no one was surprised.

Johnny vs Eyes Front

He was one win away from being in the technically-inaccurately-named semi-finals. Sladkus was the first opponent who forced him out of autopilot; the other fighter was broader in the shoulders, had a longer reach and a kick that could clear Johnny's head. For the first time all day, Johnny found himself stepping backwards and raising his arms to block.

Johnny heard his friends cheering behind him. As he ducked and swiveled, he saw Daniel and his sensei watching.

An opening: Sladkus dropped his left guard. Johnny could tag him easily. But in the split second he felt the weight Daniel's attention, he missed his chance. They broke up apart with shifting footwork; reengaged a few seconds later in a fresh approach. The opening was gone.

Johnny blocked. Sladkus grabbed his arm and twisted, throwing him to the ground, and he rolled away before the follow-up blow could land on his back. He sprang to his feet and saw Kreese observing skeptically from the edge of the crowd.

Before the final match last year, and during all the years that came before it, Kreese never had to say a word to Johnny in a match. He'd trained him so closely and so hard, he could set expectations with a single look. He used to brag that Johnny's biggest strength as a fighter was that he had Kreese's voice in his head: he never had to wonder what to do. He never had to wonder about anything at all.

Sladkus came for his side, and Johnny stepped away from the lunge and drove his knee up into the other boy's gut. While he was still bent over, Johnny rabbited forward with a punch that laid him out flat on his back.

He won and was through to the semi-finals, and he didn't know where to look.

Johnny vs Tommy

They stood quietly by the bleachers as the tournament staff reorganized the gym floor in preparation for the final rounds. Daniel stuck close to Mr. Miyagi: practically pacing in place, his mouth breaking the highway speed limit for the state of California. Johnny was relieved, because the other boy's nerves couldn't help him now. If he had a choice, he'd have Daniel out of the building entirely. He was so distracting.

They all watched silently as Barnes beat Dempsey in his semi-final match, and then it was official. There was no more hoping for a break or any other ending than what Johnny had always felt in his gut was inevitable. It was going to be a fight. It was always going to be a fight.

But first, Johnny found himself in the bracket opposite Tommy.

“You want something to throw him off his game,” said Dutch quietly as Johnny shook out his shoulders, “maybe blow him a kiss? Or like, pretend you like his ass or something. He's still pretty uncomfortable with all that.”

Johnny's face twisted in disgust. “I am not going to do any of that. Besides – get him angry enough, and he might really take a swing at me. I still have to fight Barnes after this.”

A few feet away, Bobby was talking to Tommy. It looked serious, and Tommy listened with a blank expression before saying something short and shaking his head. Bobby looked exasperated, and then he looked thoughtful.

Johnny turned away and walked out onto the mat. The final round spotlights were hot and familiar on his skin, and it took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust. He waited in place, eyes on Tommy as he stepped up to the mat. Tommy took his position and met Johnny's eyes. Overhead the announcer was babbling, reaching for a bad pun about their dojo being not-so-cooperative. (Fucking Jim.)

“Fighters, turn to me,” said the ref, and they both turned and bowed. “Turn, bow.”

They bowed to each other, eyes locked. Johnny came up out of it and set his feet, raised his fists.

Tommy didn't.

The ref paused and the crowd murmured in confusion.

“I withdraw,” Tommy told the ref; he looked at Johnny and said with a voice that had to be audible in all corners of the big room, “with respect.”

And then he bowed at Johnny again. Johnny belatedly dropped his fists to his sides and bowed back. His heart was pounding. The crowd was more confused than ever, but a polite, ragged applause came from the stands anyway.

“Let's be real,” said Tommy when he came back off the mat. “You stand the best chance at beating Barnes. That's what matters here. And anyway, you deserve to do it. You're the one Kreese came after.”

Johnny's throat went tight. He could only nod and mutter *thanks, man.* Meanwhile, overhead, they announced the first final of the evening: in twenty minutes, John Lawrence of the West Valley Karate Cooperative and Mike Barnes of Cobra Kai, duking it out to see who would take on the defending champion, Daniel LaRusso.

Daniel was at his side in seconds, shifting anxiously from foot to foot. “Johnny, I need to – can I talk to you, please? Real quick, out in the hallway or something?”

Johnny put his water bottle down and jerked his head in a wordless *let's go*. Dutch made an obnoxious kissing face at them, and he discreetly flipped him off behind Daniel's back. He followed Daniel out of the gym.

They made it to one of the deserted back hallways between the warm-up rooms and administrative offices, and Daniel wheeled around, eyes wide.

“Look, I know you want to focus on the fight right now, and I'm seriously not trying to distract you or anything. But Johnny, I've got a really bad feeling about this.”

"Well, yeah,” said Johnny, because duh. At this point you'd have to be blind not to see that Barnes fought dirty. He was so obvious, even the crowd could tell, and the crowds at these things rarely understood the actual rules of the tournament. But a few people had even started to boo Barnes here and there in his last two matches.

“No, look – after everything that's happened, I feel like I know a little more about Terry Silver than you,” said Daniel carefully.

Johnny blinked in bemusement. He had mostly forgot about Terry Silver; the man was just the glittering feint that came before Kreese's iron fist. He didn't know how to explain this to Daniel without sounding like he was dismissing his concern. He squinted into the air in thought.

“And I know you're probably worried about Kreese, and I don't want to seem like I'm trying to downplay that, but man – Silver would do anything. Okay? He'd do *anything*, Johnny. He's crazy, for-real crazy. You were hurt so bad last month, and I just have this terrible feeling like it's going to happen again, or it's going to be *worse*—”

His voice cracked. Johnny glanced around and immediately took hold of his arms, pushing Daniel back into a doorway and crowding him.

“But I see it coming this time. I'm going to be fine,” he said firmly,

face tucked close, and when Daniel shook his head and tried to argue, he stopped the spill of words with his lips: kissing him swift and strong so he could feel how sure Johnny was, how solid he was about it. Daniel made an unhappy, desperate sound but kissed him back.

“I have to get back to the gym,” he said reluctantly, drawing away after only a minute. Daniel searched his eyes, looking less comforted than he'd like, but he only nodded and dropped his arms from their hold on Johnny's waist.

When they turned, Kreese was standing at the end of the hallway: the original wall of black, contained in just one body.

Daniel stopped immediately, eyes going wide and hands balling into fists. “What do you want,” he said loudly, and if he cared that they were just seen by the worst person possible, he didn't let on anywhere in his tone or expression. Brave kid, thought Johnny numbly. He was always so brave.

“Daniel, go,” said Johnny. When the other boy whipped around to stare at him, he met his eyes and said again, intent, “Just go. I'll be fine.”

Johnny's hands tingled as Daniel walked down the hallway and passed Kreese – well within striking distance, and he could tell Daniel was on high alert for the slightest twitch from his direction. But Kreese didn't move except to follow his passage with a smile of light contempt.

And then they were alone.

What do you want, Johnny could've said, but Daniel had already asked and anyway, Johnny wasn't sure he wanted to know. He just wanted to get through this encounter and somehow emerge unscathed and unchanged.

“You know, when my colleague first told me about you, I didn't believe him. And when it became apparent he was telling the truth, I was so worried for you, Johnny.”

He blinked, confused. “Worried about me,” he said.

“Yes," he said, candid. He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. "Worried that maybe LaRusso had fucked the spirit right out of you, turned you into a soft little faggot, wrist too limp to throw a proper punch.”

Johnny's stomach went cold and his vision, a little hazy at the edges as he refused to blink through the moment. He said nothing; after an ugly pause, he started forward as well. Walking towards and past Kreese was harder than it looked, and it had looked almost impossible.

“But I've seen today you're still a fighter,” continued Kreese, as he passed. “I like that.”

“I don't give a shit what you like,” said Johnny, but he was a beat too late and a shade too quiet for it to sound entirely honest, and Kreese smiled like he knew it.

Johnny vs Words of Advice

Time ticked down, and Johnny jumped in place on the side of the ring. His friends had all said their *good lucks* and were settled in the stands. For this part, Johnny stood alone. He had no sensei to give last minute marching orders, and he was fine with that.

He looked across the mat to where Barnes was standing, listening to Kreese and Silver talk at him from either side. Yeah, he was definitely better off missing all that.

He started slightly as Mr. Miyagi approached along the side of the mat; over his head, he could see Daniel watching them.

“Uh, hi,” said Johnny.

Mr. Miyagi nodded briefly and said, in a tone he swore might have been almost awkward, “Miyagi want to say – make good fight.”

“Oh,” said Johnny. “Right, yeah – thanks. Yeah.” He thought about it, looking around around the arena. He said, aiming for somewhere between no-pressure-just-joking and respect, “Got any uh, last minute advice?”

Mr. Miyagi looked up at him and then over to Cobra Kai. He didn't say anything at first, and Johnny was ready to let it go, seriously-it's-okay, but then:

“Whole world not enemy, Lawrence-san. Opponent in fight Barnes, not Sensei Kreese.”

He shifted on his feet and swung his arms a little, chewing on that. And he didn't mean to argue, but, “Well, yeah, in the ring. I know that. But the only reason we're here today is Kreese. He started all this.”

“For man with no forgiveness in heart,” said Mr. Miyagi, “life worse punishment than death.”

How am I supposed to forgive someone who hasn't apologized? wondered Johnny. Aloud, he said, “I'm sorry. I don't – I don't think I understand.”

Mr. Miyagi shook his head, waved his hand. “No need sorry. Father say many things, Miyagi don't understand for years. Take what's

useful, when useful." He nodded firmly. "Focus opponent."

"Yeah, okay," said Johnny, because that part he could definitely do. "I will – thank you."

"Good luck," said Mr. Miyagi, awkward again, and he returned to Daniel, who clearly immediately began quizzing him on what he'd said. Daniel probably knew what the forgiveness thing meant; he'd forgiven Johnny, after all. Maybe he could ask him later.

Johnny vs And Now Some Words From Our Sponsor

He wondered if it should be counted as part of the cheating that they were making Johnny sit through all this talking. The announcer went on about a donation for the purchase of a permanent home for the tournament, and then he handed the mic to Terry Silver of all people, and Johnny stopped listening.

He squinted across the mat to where Silver's weird henchboys were walking around in tight T-shirts and giving out free matching copies to the crowd. Were they for real? Since when did Cobra Kai want its badge emblazoned on the chests of random scrawny kids and out-of-shape dads?

Johnny twisted around and looked back at his friends: *what the fuck?* Bobby shook his head and shrugged: *I don't know, man.* Dutch's mouth was open in a half-formed sneer; he looked more confused than anything. Jim looked like he'd zoned out completely. Tommy's eyes were narrowed in dislike, knee jiggling like he wished he was fighting after all.

Johnny looked back around. He wished the Goomba had been in the tournament. He would've loved to fight him, he thought. He lost himself picturing it; that necklace would turn into a pretty handy choker. He could haul him backwards by it, and then, while he was still gasping for air—

"—the greatest karate man I've ever known, Sensei John Kreese," said Silver, and Johnny unwillingly snapped back to listening. On the other side of the room, Kreese lifted his hand in greeting to the crowd, who made a lot of noise like there was a studio applause button flashing somewhere overhead; Johnny almost checked for one. "Together, we're about to open a chain of Cobra Kai dojos."

Johnny didn't need to look back at his friends again. He could feel their attention, frozen and cold like his own. It was something they'd already known about, but hearing it was different. More Cobra Kai dojos; he couldn't picture it, couldn't envision what that might do to the valley. He thought about what Daniel had said in the hallway about Silver.

"A place where young people can come and learn the same values I've

learned," continued Silver, and then the only person he had eyes for was Daniel. He smiled at him. "Honesty, compassion, and fair play."

Johnny's hands balled into fists. Daniel exploded into another round of ranting, inaudible over the gullible cheers of the crowd.

"Thank you all for coming," said Terry, finally wrapping things up. "Enjoy the match."

His voice and eyes said he definitely would.

"Johnny, you got this, man," shouted Bobby, clapping hard, and whether Johnny had it was unclear, but it didn't matter because suddenly, finally, it was time. Mike Barnes stepped onto the mat, rolling his head around his neck and staring at him with his cold, beady eyes.

Johnny stepped forward.

Johnny vs Mike Barnes

Mike Barnes didn't bow.

It was something Johnny had noticed in his previous matches, and it had bothered him, but not as much as it bothered him now, when he was the one not being acknowledged. Mike Barnes didn't bow to his opponents and it was only the latest thing that made him unworthy.

He didn't belong on this mat or in this building. He didn't deserve the gi on his back; he hadn't earned it. It had taken Johnny months to earn his first practice gi. Barnes had probably accepted his black after signing a contract.

Johnny bowed: to his friends for coming together and having his back, for fighting with him; to Daniel and his sensei, who had shown him he didn't have to let karate go just because the root was bad; to the ref, even though he had his doubts about him; and finally, to Mike Barnes, because fuck him.

“Fighting positions,” said the ref, and they collapsed out: stances wide, arms ready. The ref put his arm down. They waited, eyes locked. “Begin!"

The arm came up, and they both lunged forward. Barnes knocked Johnny's front kick aside like he'd seen it coming from a mile away and smashed his fist into the side of his head.

Johnny fell.

Johnny vs The Body in Front of Him

He was in a tournament, but it didn't feel like any tournament he'd ever been in before, because Johnny didn't get hurt in tournaments.

Or – no. Didn't he?

He snapped backwards with the punch and fell, rolled automatically to avoid any follow-up blow. *No point*, went his brain and also: *what the fuck, get up, strike back.* Fury and embarrassment swept in like curtains from stage left and right, and it was the last clear thought he had for a while.

The ref stretched an arm out towards a sneering Barnes, who was still trying to advance on Johnny. The man was saying something about one of those new bullshit penalty points – and fuck that. Who has the time.

Johnny planted a hand on the mat and twisted his hips, sweeping Barnes to the ground. He followed it up with a short but efficient kick to the chin, and then more refs were swarming forward, pulling them apart before Barnes could scramble at him again.

No points, was the ultimate verdict. Warnings delivered, which Johnny barely heard. Score was still tied zero-zero.

Barnes stared at him wildly. He looked at Johnny like he finally remembered what had happened the last time they fought. Well – last two times. Johnny forgot he'd actually kicked him in the face in the old dojo. The memory made him grin now, and he held onto the grin as the ref reset them to their lines; as the hand came down between them; as it went back up.

It wasn't a tournament at all, he discovered. Tournaments have rules and structure, and this had neither.

Johnny scored a point: a clean blow to Barnes's chest. He scored another, and it was ignored. Barnes delivered a hard kick to his ribs, point. They spun across the mat: a kick, blocked; a knee, dodged; a punch.

Barnes twisted to the side, cupping his nose, and the ref subtracted Johnny's point. Zero-one. Whatever, the pain Barnes felt was worth it.

But maybe he was like Johnny, maybe sometimes he didn't feel the pain at first. After another reset, there was no hesitation or confusion in him when he headbutted Johnny, returning the blow to his nose – and hits to the nose, man. They really were the worst.

His entire face stung. Blood dripped down from his aching nose, and he roughly swept it aside with his wrist. Zero-zero, they were reset, and Johnny was growing impatient. There was more than one way to win this, he thought. Barnes couldn't fight in the final if he couldn't walk.

He swept forward across the mat, and they traded a series of fruitless blocked hits.

“How's that knee?” shouted Johnny, and Barnes faltered – not a lot, but enough. Johnny fisted a hand in the front of his gi, and slipped a foot behind his ankle, got him flat and helpless on the mat.

He raised his fist and whipped his hair out of his eyes – where was his headband?

He caught sight of Daniel, staring at him from the top of the ring.

Johnny vs Exit Light

“Wait,” said Johnny, and he wasn't talking to Barnes.

Just as well, because Barnes didn't listen anyway. He planted his feet against Johnny's chest and kicked him off, and Johnny sprawled back, perfectly lost.

He dragged himself away clumsily, trying to give himself time to figure it out. He licked his lips and tasted blood. The din of the cavernous room crashed down on him. Had it been so loud this whole time? He needed to think. He needed to *see*—

Johnny, get up! Get up, man! Tommy? He turned his head but got stuck looking at Daniel again, who still looked sick – *he's scared of me* – and then Daniel looked horrified, because Barnes was descending.

He jumped on top of Johnny and knocked his hands aside, started punching like his face was a practice dummy and he wanted to work on his precision. Johnny's brain went quiet and the room went loud, and he struggled pathetically against the weight on his chest, and he wasn't a person because this kind of thing didn't happen to people, he was pretty sure.

Except it had happened to Daniel, hadn't it.

The weight lifted abruptly. Barnes caught him one last time with a furious stray kick as he was dragged away. Johnny shoved up onto his elbows, blinking weakly. He shook his head but that didn't help any.

Are you alright? asked a mustachioed man in a red shirt, and Johnny said *yes* because you don't show weakness to strangers, you never know what they'll do with it.

He shook his head again. When he was directed to stand on a line, he obeyed and found himself opposite Barnes again; still.

Was this how Daniel had felt? All those times. On the beach when he couldn't have had a clue about what Johnny was, and at school once he'd lost his choice in the knowledge. Or last year on this very mat, when he limped and shook and stayed stubbornly opposite Johnny. He'd always looked so scared (like he looked scared now) and why, what did he think Johnny was going to do to him?

The question tilted something in his mind under the glaring lights of the gym, made him realize how out of it he really was, because what Daniel thought Johnny was going to do to him all those times was exactly what he had done. Did he think he was allowed to just forget that?

Zero-zero, said the ref, and it was like he was pronouncing something serious about Johnny, something that was going to stick to him forever. The man put his hand down, and on the other side of that flat palm, Barnes danced in place, anticipatory.

Johnny's eyes edged past the jumping black shoulder and found Kreese.

The hand lifted and so did a black-clad leg. Johnny stumbled back, ducking. He blocked, poorly, and took a hard blow to the solar plexus that laid him out flat on the edge of the mat. The ref interceded more quickly this time, pushing Barnes away before he could pounce.

Johnny coughed and groaned. He curled in on himself and rolled, but he couldn't move beyond that. He didn't, he didn't think he could move again.

“Johnny,” said Daniel, bursting into his life from beyond the bright red world of the mat. He fell hard to his knees just on the edge of the ring, hands hovering but never landing on him.

His voice was frantic and thick like he was choking. Johnny could barely understand him between the pounding in his ears and the crowd, but none of that mattered compared to the cool relief of just being near him, that feeling he'd welcome even if he was on his death bed, because he knew Daniel, didn't he, and there was nothing like knowing him, and he—

“Johnny, for god's sake, stop. Just *stop*, please, it's not worth it. None of it. Please, Johnny—”

“I love you so much,” he gasped out, and somehow he could shove back up to standing then, and somehow he could leave Daniel kneeling frozen in place with cheeks wet from tears, looking stricken and awful. And somehow he could turn back to his line and the fight.

Johnny vs Pit Stop

Before they could reset and start another bout, a harsh sound buzzed overhead. Johnny flinched slightly and even as the announcer was already talking to the crowd, the ref explained to him, not unkindly:

“That was the end of the three minute round.”

“That was three minutes?” said Johnny, numb.

“Go to your senseis,” said the ref.

Barnes turned away immediately, but Johnny stayed where he was, weaving slightly on his feet. He didn't have a sensei. He had no where to go. He breathed through his nose, and it stung so bad he decided never to do it again.

“Johnny!” shouted Bobby from very far away. Johnny turned and blinked at him dumbly. He waved a hand, impatiently beckoning him over. “C'mon, what are you doing?”

“Get your ass over here,” called Dutch beside him. They were all standing, waiting for him.

He went.

And he'd forgotten, somehow, that Kreese's silent approval wasn't actually his favorite part of winning matches – it was the most lasting pleasure, what he thought about when he trained. But it wasn't his favorite part. It could never compare to the feeling of crossing back off the mat to a wall that lifted and opened and revealed itself to be a fort: one he belonged to without question, one that wanted him there.

He got back to the guys, and they started in on him like he was a race car taking a pit stop. His tires were busted and there was smoke coming from the hood, and they only had thirty seconds before they had to send him back out for a few more death-defying turns around the track.

Jim wiped his face, taking care around his nose and eye and jaw, and his expression said Johnny wouldn't want to look in a mirror any time soon.

“Sudden death means first to score a point wins the whole thing,” said Bobby rapidly. “No more penalty points, no more messing around. So

long as you block everything he's got, you're still in this."

"That means you see an opening, you take it," said Dutch.

"Focus, Johnny," said Tommy. "Forget everything else."

And it wasn't their words that mattered so much as the fact that they were saying them at all. They looked at him and saw a future where this was over and he hadn't failed. They looked and still saw him.

And they touched him: the towel lifted, they all clapped his back and shoulder and then muttered sorry when he winced. And then he was turning back to the ring.

It hadn't even been a minute, but his head felt more clear.

Johnny vs The Person in His Head

When he was a kid and Kreese first taught him to punch, he was told he must always punch through – *through* his target, because that's how depth perception and force worked, but also through the pain of the strike. And Johnny's been punching through ever since. He didn't realize there was any other way to move forward.

The referee set them in place and started the round, and Johnny focused on blocking and dodging so he could think. He just needed to think, and as it happened, he thought best when moving.

Barnes wasn't a fighter. He was a thug. Johnny recognized it because he'd been one too, sometimes. Tournament rules were something they were all taught to abide but not to respect, and Johnny hadn't thought about it much at the time because he was always going to win regardless. He was the best, after all. But he saw now how cheap and ugly it was. If there were no rules then there was no winning beyond who was the last man standing, but what was he standing for? Not himself. Kreese? Had it always just been Kreese?

Barnes chased him around the mat, and the gym turned in his eye line like a carousel, a twisted kaleidoscope of watching faces, and who, who were they watching?

It had to mean something that *this* was who Kreese had chosen to take back the All Valley. Barnes didn't even fight like a Cobra Kai. So Kreese didn't care about karate, and he didn't care about his fighters, and he had never, ever cared about Johnny.

Johnny didn't know what to do with that.

He didn't know how he was supposed to look back on years of memories, moments that he'd held so close to his heart when everything else turned to complete shit – because what did it matter what Sid said to him, when Sensei said *good job* and what did it matter how he did in school when Sensei could plainly see he was getting stronger by the day and what did it matter who he dated when Sensei knew he was worthy.

What was Johnny supposed to do with the knowledge that he'd been so stupid, to look into those smug, satisfied eyes and imagine he ever saw pride and affection?

It wasn't just about all the bad shit Kreese had taught Johnny – maybe it wasn't about that even a little bit. You could always learn something different; Daniel had shown him that. Maybe it was about admitting he'd turned himself into an asshole for a love that had never existed, for a person who would never truly see him or think of him as anything but a tool.

But he didn't have to do that anymore.

It seemed like everyone but him was screaming. Kreese was shouting *finish him* and Barnes was spitting something, Johnny didn't know what; he wasn't a very good listener. In a fight you take your opponent's anger and fear and weakness and you gave back none of your own. And even if that was something Johnny was ever going to change in the future, he wouldn't give it to people like Barnes or Kreese.

Barnes threw another punch and Johnny angled out of the way, caught his arm. He turned and hauled the other boy over his shoulders, throwing him to the mat hard enough to knock the air from his chest. The room got louder, and Kreese was still shouting *finish him*.

Johnny pulled back his fist and this time he didn't look up, he didn't think about anyone else in the room. He just let the punch go.

Johnny vs Forgiveness

He stopped the punch a millimeter from his nose, close enough to feel the puff of air Barnes blew out against his fist. Cobra Kai had taught Johnny to punch through, but Daniel's kata required precision and control, and he'd been practicing for months now.

Barnes jerked, his eyes flying up in confused terror.

Johnny opened his fist and tapped his face like he was doing nothing more than pressing a button on an arcade game. *KO*. He forgot to say it aloud; oh well, it was pretty satisfying in his head.

“Point!” shouted the referee.

Johnny stepped neatly back and dragged in a lungful of air. His wrist was hauled up and he was declared the winner, and this was why the structure and rules of a tournament were useful sometimes; Barnes instantly went from being a threat to being no one he had to care about at all, ever again.

Barnes knew it too; his expression twisted in fury, and he pounded the mat with his fists. Somewhere on the side of the gym, Kreese was reacting somehow and Silver was going somewhere. None of it mattered to Johnny. Not just then.

His friends ran onto the mat and grabbed him roughly, unheeding of his many (*so* many) bruises, their voices full of relief and pride. Johnny swayed into them, relieved to have something to keep him standing upright as the adrenaline from the match started to drain away.

But he forgot it wasn't over for everyone else in the room; the announcer stepped up to the mat, roping his microphone along like what they all had just witnessed was merely one more match among dozens in the day.

“While we wait for the challenger to catch his breath after that – uh, exciting fight, we can look forward to the grand finale. *Who* will take the title of the All Valley Championship? Will it be John Lawrence of the West Valley—”

And, jesus.

“No,” said Johnny loudly, stepping forward out of his friends' hands. He reached for the announcer to forestall the rest of his spiel, and the man stopped, looking at him in confusion and perhaps growing annoyance.

“No,” he said again, because that had never been the plan; that was never going to happen. “I withdraw.”

He finally looked over to Daniel, who was standing beside Mr. Miyagi and staring back at him, eyes huge in his face. Johnny tried to put his whole heart into his next words, so that Daniel would understand just what he was trying to say, what he really meant when he told the man:

“I'm done.” He watched as Daniel's shoulders fell, as his expression broke like a wave upon the rocks. “I'm done fighting.”

Johnny & First Aid

“So, how does it feel to be a two-time All Valley champion?” asked Johnny. He was sitting shirtless on a PT table with a few ice packs (too many ice packs, really) as one of the arena medics checked over his ribs and shoulder.

Daniel, still in his gi because he'd insisted on accompanying Johnny immediately, folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the wall a few feet away. He pushed out his mouth and gave him a dark look. “You think you're so funny.”

Johnny shrugged the shoulder that wasn't being prodded. He gave Daniel a close-mouthed smile, though he could feel it pulling the cut on his lip. He didn't care.

“I think you're good,” said the medic, stepping back. “But you'll want to take it easy. And if the pain doesn't improve in a couple days, go get an X-ray.”

“Thanks,” said Johnny, and the man nodded and snapped off his gloves. He turned away to his kit, and Johnny looked past him to where Daniel was still playing mad. He risked saying, “*Two* two-time All Valley champs. I think that sounds loads better than just one.”

Daniel scoffed. “I give it a month, tops, before you start making a bunch of dumb little jokes – 'oh, you know I did all the real work....'”

“But I did do all the real work,” Johnny pointed out, and Daniel flapped an irate arm.

“There you go! Couldn't even make it thirty seconds.” He looked away and shifted against the wall, and Johnny really hoped the medic left soon, because he figured Daniel very badly needed to either lay into him or maybe just hug.

(Across the room, an inconsiderate someone had installed a mirror, and when he glanced at it with his one good eye, the reflection... wasn't great. He had no idea how he was going to face his mom looking like this. For the first time in his life, he kind of wished he lived in a place that got really cold in December; then maybe he could wear a ski mask or something for a week, and she'd never have to know.)

Johnny lifted the pack of ice away from his face, because it was dripping everywhere and running down his neck, and it was really goddamn cold. He set it to the side and looked back to Daniel, watching him quietly. After a moment, he began to smile again.

Daniel narrowed his eyes. “What?”

The medic finally left the room.

Johnny stretched out his hand and kicked his legs over the table. Daniel immediately pushed off the wall and approached.

“I was just thinking,” said Johnny, once he had a hand on his hip. “You are never going to let me hear the end of this, are you.”

Daniel stepped between his legs and leaned his face into his mottled chest. “Not if you play your cards right,” he muttered, and then he sighed and pressed a kiss to his pec.

Johnny hurt all over, and he could already tell he would have a lot trouble moving around in a few hours. But he'd never felt better.

Johnny & The Parking Lot After

Daniel walked with him out of the arena to the parking lot, where they found his friends bunched together alongside the Avanti, questioning Mr. Miyagi about whether he knew he could take Kreese from the first moment he saw him, and what's the most number of guys he's fought at once before, and has he ever lost a fight?

“Oh god, what have I done,” said Daniel in an urgent undertone, though when Johnny glanced at him, he looked more fascinated than appalled. “I let romance and hormones distract me, and I abandoned my best friend! A classic tale of youth.”

“Yeah, they should make an after-school special about you,” said Johnny.

The guys caught sight of them and broke out shouting, their words overlapping. They seemed relieved, Johnny thought. Giddy with it, almost.

“John-boy, you look like *shit*,” crowed Dutch.

“Yeah, haven't seen you so smashed up since the eighth grade,” said Bobby. “With Red – man, you guys remember Red?”

Tommy hoisted the second place trophy and let it hover demonstratively over the front of the Avanti. “What do you think, new hood ornament?”

Jim snatched the trophy roughly out his hands, and Johnny almost flinched as it came close to scraping over the car. Daniel discreetly pressed his arm with his own in wordless comfort.

“Excuse me,” said Jim, “but this is technically property of the WVKC.”

“Sounds like a radio station or something,” said Daniel as they came to a stop in front of them all. “You guys should really work on that name.”

Johnny rubbed the back of his neck. “No point, it was just a one-time thing.” He glanced at Mr. Miyagi and away again.

“Actually, a few kids came up to me before the semi-finals,” said Jim, switching his offended frown from Daniel and brightening. “They asked if they could join our club, get some lessons.”

Dutch scowled at him over the top of the car. “Why would they come to you? You weren't even fighting.”

He shrugged. “Guess they found me more approachable.”

“Look, if you could just explain how you got the leverage to flip two of us at the *same time*, I'd really appreciate it,” said Tommy, returning his attention to Mr. Miyagi, who didn't sigh but it looked like a near thing. “It's just, I've been wondering for over a year.”

“Okay,” said Daniel loudly, clapping and stepping forward to free his sensei from the thick of the cobra nest or whatever. “We're gonna go now. See you... all,” and here he cast Johnny the face equivalent of a wild shrug, “later.... C'mon Mr. Miyagi, let's go home. Hey, maybe tonight's the night to break out some sake?”

“Sake for special occasion only,” he said, and they began to walk across the lot towards his truck.

“Hey, I didn't fight, isn't that a special enough occasion?”

“Miyagi hope not.”

Daniel's voice carried backwards, “And I hope you don't mind those guys – think of them like weird fanged little ducklings, okay? Hit 'em a couple times and they imprint on you or something.” And he glanced over his shoulder at Johnny with a cheeky grin, just to show he'd done it on purpose.

Johnny shook his head and suppressed a smile. He was going to see him later that night, but who was he kidding, he kind of missed him already.

“Can't believe we don't get to push that kid around anymore,” said Dutch, and then his eyes widened and he slapped Johnny's shoulder hard. He ignored the wince this produced. “Oh, man, you missed all the action.”

“Did I?” said Johnny between gritted teeth. “Did I really, man?”

“No, he's talking about – it happened while you were getting checked out,” said Bobby, shoving Dutch back. He met Johnny's eyes and said, “Like twenty minutes ago, this guy—”

“*Really* dweeby-looking,” put in Tommy, like it was important. He lifted his hands to count off on his fingers. “We're talking glasses,

pocket protector—”

“We don't know that he had a pocket protector, he was wearing a jacket.”

“Yeah, and did you see that jacket? Dude absolutely had a pocket protector underneath that thing. Bet he wore sock suspenders too.”

“Anyway,” said Bobby, looking back to Johnny, who was so confused. “Guy walks right up to Kreese in the parking lot and he *serves him papers*.”

“Papers,” said Johnny, not getting it.

“Like lawyer shit, man.”

He thought about the description they'd given. “Wait, like – Leonard? Was his name Leonard?”

“How the hell would we know his first name?” asked Bobby, confused, but Johnny wasn't paying attention anymore, he was wheeling around to stare out at the emptying parking lot.

“Did you see my mom?” he asked. They all shook their heads.

“Hey, Johnny,” said Jim, sidling up: hands full. “You haven't held your trophy yet, man.”

Johnny glanced down, distracted, as it was put into his hands. He gripped the cool columns of the trophy and looked blankly down at his name etched on the tiny plaque at the base. It looked the same as the one from last year, he thought. Name of the dojo was different, of course, but also – so was the feeling he got from looking at it. Pride instead of shame, and the complete absence of fear.

But the relief was the same.

At home, he followed the sidewalk around the back and came up short at the corner when he saw his mom sitting outside the pool house. He hesitated in the dark, watching her. She had her shoes off, her knees to her chest, and she was gazing up at the main house. He couldn't read her expression. Maybe she was just zoning out.

There was nothing else to do but step forward into the soft spill of lights. She looked over immediately and under the ghostly cast of the pool lights, every muscle in her face seemed to tremble at their foundations as she took in the state of him. He might have been the worst thing she'd ever seen.

“It's not as bad as it looks,” he said quickly, stepping forward with his hand outstretched. “Honest, Mom. It's – it's just bruises.”

“I know,” she said, after a few seconds detached themselves from the moment and drifted away. She looked down at the pool with eyes that didn't seem to see. “I talked to the medic after the fight. I wanted to be sure you hadn't hurt your head again.”

He took that in. “So, you were there. Did you – you saw the match?”

She nodded, and he looked around at the water and concrete and disused lounge chairs. He wanted to excuse himself, leave. Instead, he sat down cross-legged beside her and clutched close the fact that she didn't shift away from him. He tried to think of something to say.

“Bobby said there was – did um. Did your lawyer do something?”

Laura slid a finger beneath her eye and dashed the wetness there aside. She said with waterlogged briskness, “We're suing John Kreese. For what he did last year. Leonard thinks we might be able to loop that other man in as well, since it seems he was the one who owned the dojo – liability issues, or something like that, I don't know. Sometimes when Leonard starts getting into the finer details of things, I find it hard to pay attention.”

“Don't know if that's a good idea,” he said. “Poking that bear, I mean. Like, it's over now. I'm fine.”

She closed her eyes briefly: too long to count as a blink. “The fighting is over,” she agreed steadily. “But there are rules in this society. About

how people get to act, how they treat people and *kids*. I'm not letting him get away with it."

"Mom, I'm sorry," he said, because she sounded so unhappy, and she'd been unhappy so often in the past four months. "For everything, I—"

She made a quiet, wretched sound and dragged him down into a hug. He held her back tightly.

"Don't be sorry," she said fiercely. "I'm sorry. Johnny, baby – you're my whole world, and I just keep learning new ways I've been blind about what's been going on with you."

And that was obviously bullshit, because: "You're not blind, I was hiding. I didn't want you to know any of it."

She pulled back. "You mean about the fighting?"

"About everything. About me." He shrugged, uncomfortable. "It's like every time I was home last year, all I could see was how, like. The way you saw me and the way I *was* kept getting more and more different. Felt like I was lying all the time, and if you knew the truth, I just, I don't know."

If she knew the truth, he knew she'd blame herself – kind of like what she was doing.

"Look, Mom, I'm not." He sat up a little, but shifted closer so the move didn't pull him from her. "I'm not trying to say," what was he trying to say? "Sensei Kreese was an asshole, okay? I know that now. But the thing is – I was too. I'm trying not to be, but I was. Back then, I mean. For a while." A long while. "And that wasn't your fault. Everything I do isn't your fault."

Laura bit her lip and made a strange face, looking away again. He squinted at her interrogatively. "What."

"Nothing," she said, a little dry. "Just remembering my mother. When I was a certain age, it was like every choice I made was a personal betrayal to her. Like she had a limb that suddenly started moving without her permission."

"I don't think you're like that," he said hastily.

She smiled at him sidelong, still a little teary, and slapped his knee. "Well, I will accept that small comfort, at least."

He rolled his eyes.

She sniffed a little and said, “Oh, also, Lucille and I want to take out restraining orders against those men. We're gathering everything we need – witness reports, stuff like that. But we'll need you two to sign off, since you're both adults now.”

He didn't want to think about all that. In his mind, it was all over. Somehow, in his gut when he thought about Kreese, he knew the man wouldn't try anything now; he'd lost. But he couldn't explain how he knew, so he just said:

“Sure, whatever you want.”

He dared drop his arm around her shoulders. She leaned into his side, put her arm around his waist, and together they looked down into the brilliant pale blue of the pool.

Johnny & Daniel

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was very late when he drove across the valley. He almost fell asleep over the Avanti's steering wheel while waiting for the longest train in North America to pass: the rhythmic sound of its racking passage coaxing his lids down over his eyes for blinks of longer and longer duration until finally in a gasp of shocking openness it was done, and the crossing arms raised like it was no big deal.

The street ahead was clear. He drove on.

He parked in his usual spot near Mr. Miyagi's house and climbed out, grimacing a little at the stiffness in his arms and legs. Without thinking, he walked down the sidewalk and stopped beside the tree overhanging the garden fence.

He stared up into the strong branches, tracing the path of ascent that would take him from the dark street into the softly-lit garden. After a minute of his body stubbornly not moving, he turned around and walked back past the Avanti to the garden gate.

The gate was unlocked. It would probably always be unlocked.

The lights were all off in Mr. Miyagi's main house, and he had to step carefully as he crossed the garden. Last thing he needed was to fall off the deck into some water or a bush and wake the man with all the splashing or his cursing, Daniel's inevitable laughter.

He stepped up to the straight-shot path leading to Daniel's room. The lattice screen of his door was lit from within by a pale lamp glow; he was waiting up for Johnny.

Moving on some instinct he didn't have the energy to question, Johnny stepped quietly up to the door and, instead of sliding it open like he had so many times in the past, he leaned his shoulder against the frame and rapped softly on it with his knuckle.

He kept his eyes down until the door slid open, and then he raised them, and there he was. Johnny smiled.

Daniel stared at him, caught out for some reason: surprised, but by

what, Johnny couldn't guess; he'd known he was coming over, after all. Daniel's eyes swept over Johnny's bruised face and stiff body, and *then* he put his head back and made like he was unaffected by any of it.

“What's the password?” he asked.

“Password?” Johnny glanced past him to the room: specifically, the soft, warm bed that was so close at hand. “Oh, I need a password to get in now, huh?”

Daniel only nodded solemnly.

“Well, I'm glad you've finally decided to up your security, at least,” said Johnny. He rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand and considered the situation: eyes flicking over the other boy, his big eyes and weird mood.

Daniel put his hand up against the frame inches from Johnny's shoulder and stood there, fidgeting.

“I'm... sorry?” hazarded Johnny; Daniel rolled his eyes. Weirdly, he also flushed a little. “Okay, not that. Right.”

He squinted into space. Man, he was tired. When he drove over here, he'd been too heart-full to really imagine what they'd do; mostly, he'd been counting on Daniel to steer things. And he was, but he was doing a lousy job, which was typical. This was exactly why Johnny never trusted him with the romance meter – and, huh.

Daniel's dark eyes watched him closely, fixed and unblinking as he waited. He worried his bottom lip with his teeth.

Johnny laughed a little, low and sure. He swung in like his shoulder on the frame was a hinge, and Daniel didn't try to stop him. His head tilted up as Johnny's angled down.

“Password, huh,” he murmured. “You want me to say it again, is that it?”

Daniel's blush deepened but he stood his ground. “Answering that could be construed as giving a hint, and I don't believe that would be fair,” he said.

“I love you.”

It was easy to say and even easier to raise his eyebrows smugly and watch as it washed over Daniel. Johnny finally pushed off the doorframe and stepped forward. Daniel backed up to let him into the room. He reached behind his back to absently slide the door shut, not taking his eyes off the other boy.

“Thought that's what you said,” said Daniel, nodding at the ground. “It was a bit hard to make out while you were, y'know – lying there on the floor in massive amounts of pain, but I suppose I shouldn't criticize it too much. It's probably not the done thing.”

Johnny crowded him close, intent. He brushed his hip with his fingers, and Daniel swayed forward like he'd pulled on him hard.

“I'll be sure to say it more clearly from now on,” he said, smiling a little.

“I'll settle for you not being hurt next time,” said Daniel, and he raised his eyes to him again. They looked at each other, and Johnny's expression went serious.

Daniel would probably hate it if he knew Johnny thought this way, but he could only help his years of training so much and this was something he *did* believe: if you love something you can bleed for it and not mind. Fear came from the hurt you don't see coming, and he'd seen this coming. He'd accepted it. He wasn't relishing the pain, but every ache was just a reminder of one Daniel wasn't feeling.

And anyway, the Daniel in his head could lay off, because it wasn't like he was going to make a habit out of it. He'd meant what he said in the arena.

Daniel was still studying his bruises with a little too much intensity, so Johnny decided it was time to redirect his focus. He took his head in his hands and kissed him, and that worked pretty good for a while; Daniel looped his arms around his waist, so he must have agreed.

“Anything else you want to discuss before I pass out?” asked Johnny after a while.

Daniel shook his head. “Words can wait,” he said, like that meant something. When Johnny thought about it, it kind of did.

“Okay, but be honest,” he said, once he'd finally completed his journey to Daniel's bed and was stretched out on his back, melting into the mattress as Daniel knelt over him.

Daniel made a questioning sound and kept unbuttoning Johnny's shirt. It was the world's most depressing strip-down; every new bit of skin revealed only made him frown more.

“How annoyed are you that I said it first?” asked Johnny.

Daniel's hands froze on the fourth button, and after a second, he pitched forward to hide his face against Johnny's stomach. His aggravated groan tickled a little. Johnny smirked up at the ceiling. Gotcha.

“You know what your problem is,” said Daniel dragging his head up to free his mouth. “You think you're like, the best boyfriend in the world—”

He shrugged modestly against the pillow. “I mean, I try.”

“And don't get me wrong,” he continued, glaring, “you're not bad! But this attitude of yours, all it does is foster an environment of unhealthy competition." Which Daniel absolutely only minded because he was currently losing. "I mean, maybe *I* wanted to say it today.”

“Nothing's stopping you.” Actually, Johnny wasn't sure he could handle that, after everything else that happened.

Daniel shook his head and resumed unbuttoning Johnny's shirt. “Oh, please. You stole all my thunder. No, no. I'll tell you what I'm gonna do. This is how it's gonna go, Johnny – you listening?”

Because Johnny had let his eyes drift shut; at the question, he nodded and made a slight noise to show he was, in fact, giving Daniel all his attention: what remained of it. And that voice carried on, ambient in the dark:

“This is how it's gonna go. I'm going to *show* you how I feel. Take tomorrow morning. I'm going to make you breakfast – best breakfast you've ever had, right. And then I'm going to draw you a bath and dump in a bunch of this weird powder Mr. Miyagi uses when I'm a little busted up.” The voice drew closer, like Daniel was crawling up the bed, until it was right above him. “And I'm going to keep doing things like that, every day, until finally, once I've lulled you into a false sense of security – I'm gonna hit you with it. Bam!”

Johnny opened his eyes and looked up at him. Daniel stretched out along his side and put a hand on his face, fingers running feather-light along his cheek and nose, meditative.

“You'll go easy on me, though, right?” he asked quietly.

Daniel's eyes flickered up to meet his warmly, and he breathed out on a smile. “Always,” he promised.

Chapter End Notes

did I say wkomd tested my patience? ha. ten months ago, I was having some fun with a few post-wkomd scenes, not really intending to do anything with them because I wasn't convinced there was a story there -- but then, fatally, I pictured johnny in the tournament: bruised to hell and vowing he was done fighting. so it goes, and so went my year.

thank you to everyone who patiently read along with this sprawling fic, through its many, many stops and starts. please know I read and treasured every comment. <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!